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Things Ain't What They Used to Be? Coaches Perceptions of Commitment
in Developing Athletes

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26 Abstract

27 Appropriate levels of commitment are fundamental to the adolescent athlete, if they are to be
28 successful in progressing through their high-performance environments (e.g., Hill,
29 McNamara, & Collins, 2015). Accordingly, the present study sought to ascertain academy
30 coaches' perceptions regarding commitment in their developing athletes. Specifically, to
31 understand the levels of perceived commitment, associated behaviors, commonalities and
32 contrasts apparent across a range of sporting environments. Semi-structured interviews were
33 conducted with 12 male UK-based academy coaches (M age = 41.25, SD = 8.76 years),
34 whom worked full time with elite youth performers between the ages of 15 to 18 years. The
35 sample comprised four soccer coaches, four coaches from other team sports (rugby union,
36 rugby league, and cricket) and four coaches from individual sports (swimming, tennis, judo,
37 and badminton), with a mean of 13.67 years' coaching experience (SD = 8.42 years).
38 Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified the following overarching
39 themes: a) what do we want? b) what are they like? and c) what do we do? The study
40 provides a valuable insight into the ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of the
41 adolescent athlete, along with current strategies coaches are employing within their practice.
42 By adding to the understanding of this important area, we hope sporting organizations,
43 practitioners, parents, and coaches can use the information to tailor their interventions and
44 service provision accordingly in supporting their athletes negotiate key developmental
45 opportunities.

46 **Lay summary:** This paper explored academy coaches' perceptions of commitment from
47 their developing athletes. The study provides a valuable insight into the ideal commitment
48 characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete, along with current strategies coaches
49 are employing within their practice from a cross-sport approach.

50 *Keywords:* adolescence, coaching, performance academies, psychology, youth sport

51 Things Ain't What They Used to Be? Coaches Perceptions of Commitment in Developing
52 Athletes

53 Developing effective performance pathways for the next generation of athletes, is a
54 long-term strategy of the UK's National Governing Bodies in their quest to produce world-
55 class performers (UK Sport, 2015). Furthermore, a number of professional sporting
56 organizations (e.g., soccer, cricket, rugby union, & rugby league) have invested in developing
57 their academy structures to better prepare their talented junior athletes for senior sporting
58 success (Finn & McKenna, 2010) and see first-teams populated with academy graduates
59 (Rowley, Potrac, Knowles, & Lee, 2019). This has included several larger scale initiatives,
60 for example, the English Premier League's elite player development plan (EPPP), to increase
61 the capacity and caliber of home-grown players (Premier League, 2016). However, with
62 professional sporting organizations willing to recruit the highest caliber of players on a global
63 scale, the uncertainty surrounding opportunities to become world-class and successfully
64 transition to senior sport, magnifies the importance of athlete commitment throughout the
65 development pathways (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014; Schnell, Mayer, Diehl,
66 Zipfel, & Thiel, 2014).

67 Sport commitment is defined as a psychological construct reflecting "the desire and
68 resolve to continue participation in a sport over time" (Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons,
69 & Keeler, 1993, p. 7). Motivation to participate in and continue competitive sport is one of
70 the most extensively studied areas in sport psychology (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002) and the
71 sport commitment model (Scanlan et al., 1993) provides a theoretical framework to examine
72 this construct. Building from interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), Rusbult's
73 (1980) investment model of commitment provided the initial empirical base for the sport
74 version of the model. The primary proposition of the sport commitment model is that greater
75 enjoyment, personal investment, involvement opportunities, social constraints, and fewer

76 involvement alternatives should translate into stronger resolve to continue participation; a
77 suggestion which has been empirically tested in several adolescent sport contexts (e.g.,
78 Carpenter & Coleman, 1998; Weiss & Weiss, 2007; Weiss, Weiss, & Amorose, 2010).
79 Alternatively, if developing athletes believe ability leads to success and their current
80 participation is too time-consuming, stressful or boring, this is likely to detract from their
81 enjoyment, desire to continue, sustained effort, and participation behavior (Carpenter &
82 Morgan, 1999; Weiss et al., 2010).

83 A further consideration is that the full-time participation across these performance
84 academies coincides with the transitional period of adolescence, whereby junior athletes can
85 experience numerous changes on a physical, psychological, and social level (Schnell et al.,
86 2014). From a psychological perspective, adolescence is a time for development of the
87 executive functions; that is, cognitive skills that enable the control and coordination of
88 thoughts and behavior, generally associated with the prefrontal cortex (Choudhury,
89 Blakemore, & Charman, 2006). Development of the executive functions mark the beginning
90 of more complex cognitive processes such as abstract thought, metacognition, problem-
91 solving, and deductive reasoning (Smith & Handler, 2007). Furthermore, biological changes
92 in structure and connectivity within the brain interact with increased experience, knowledge,
93 and changing social demands to produce rapid cognitive growth (Beltz, 2018).

94 As a consequence, Steinberg (2010) describes a maturational imbalance that can occur
95 between the development of socioemotional and cognitive control systems, contributing to
96 behavioral characteristics of adolescence. Considering also the requirement for a long-term
97 commitment to excel in these high-performance environments, the adolescent athlete can
98 therefore exhibit less than desirable behaviors. For example, across a variety of sports
99 (cricket, rugby union, soccer) the combination of developing adolescent and high-
100 performance expectation has led to athletes displaying challenging behaviors, emotional

101 unpredictability, vulnerability, and commitment issues (Devaney, Nesti, Ronkainen,
102 Littlewood, & Richardson, 2018; Hill, McNamara, & Collins, 2015; Morris, Tod, & Oliver,
103 2016). These arguably are in contrast to the psychological characteristics (e.g., confidence,
104 motivation, ability to set and achieve goals) identified as positive features of the development
105 process (e.g., Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffett, 2002).

106 Interestingly, in the Hill et al. (2015) study, English rugby union academy coaches
107 and directors deemed commitment to be dual-effect when interviewed regarding the psycho-
108 behavioral based features of effective talent development in their academy athletes. For
109 example, as a positive construct, commitment was demonstrated in perseverance, discipline, a
110 positive work ethic, the ability to sacrifice, and generally in terms of adolescent athletes'
111 commitment to develop themselves. The construct of over-commitment however, especially
112 if left unmanaged, was perceived as potentially detrimental to an athlete's development, with
113 the athlete partaking in well-meaning but misguided developmental activities, for example,
114 overtraining due to believing 'more is better'. Finally, a lack of commitment was regarded as
115 a negative psychological construct due to adolescent athletes failing to progress, putting in
116 minimal effort, and not taking ownership for their development.

117 As such, the scope for further investigating the seemingly adaptive psychological
118 construct of commitment becomes apparent. Given the necessity for athletes to optimally
119 negotiate key developmental opportunities (MacNamara, Button, & Collins, 2010), it is
120 surprising as to the relative dearth of research examining this psychological characteristic that
121 may both help and hinder the developmental process. Furthermore, this becomes even more
122 apparent, when taking into account that 15 to 18-year-old athletes are approaching their
123 junior-to-senior transition, known for its challenging nature (Stambulova, Engström, Franck,
124 Linnér, & Lindahl, 2015). Therefore, the appropriate levels of commitment are fundamental
125 to the adolescent athlete, if they are to be successful in progressing through their high-

126 performance pathway or professional academy structures. Accordingly, the primary focus of
127 this study was to ascertain academy coaches' perceptions regarding commitment in their
128 developing athletes. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the levels of perceived
129 commitment and associated behaviors across a range of sporting environments, looking for
130 commonalities and contrasts which might be apparent.

131 **Method**

132 **Methodology**

133 The research was located within an interpretive paradigm, through which researchers
134 aim to discover reality through participant's views, their own background and experiences
135 (Cresswell, 2007). Accordingly, rich descriptions of academy coaches' perceptions of
136 commitment in their developing athletes were gathered (Smith & Sparkes, 2017).
137 Furthermore, the research was underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological
138 constructionism, whereby an assumption is made that participants may have their own unique
139 interpretation or perspective of their coaching experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).
140 Academy coaches' perceptions were accordingly investigated through qualitative semi-
141 structured interviews, employing inductive thematic analysis strategies to develop and
142 describe themes that emerged from the data, while using the language of the participants to
143 fully describe the themes (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2017). Thematic analysis was thus
144 chosen based on our interpretive paradigm, and as Braun and Clarke (2006) state, can be
145 applied across a range of epistemological approaches including constructionism.

146 **Participants**

147 Following institutional ethical approval and informed consent, 12 UK-based academy
148 coaches were recruited to participate in this study. The coaches were purposefully selected
149 on the basis that they worked full time with elite youth performers between the ages of 15 to
150 18 years. The coaches were all male, Caucasian, ranging in age from 31 to 58 years ($M =$

151 41.25, $SD = 8.76$ years). The sample comprised four soccer coaches (English Premier
152 League Academies), four coaches from other team sports (England Rugby Union Premiership
153 Academy, Super League Rugby League Academy, and English County Cricket Academy)
154 and four coaches from individual sports (British Swimming, Lawn Tennis Association,
155 British Judo, and Great Britain Badminton). Four participants held the position of Academy
156 Director, a further four were employed as age-group Head Coaches, three as Academy Head
157 Coach, and one as an Academy Manager. Collectively, participants reported a mean of 13.67
158 years' coaching experience ($SD = 8.42$ years) within their respective sports and
159 predominantly coached male athletes, apart from the individual sports whom coached both
160 genders.

161 **Interview Guide**

162 Interviews followed a semi-structured approach, allowing the researchers to collect
163 the important information about the topic of interest while giving the participants the
164 opportunity to report on their own experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Therefore, although
165 there was a certain element of structure to the interviews, order of questions were dependent
166 on the response of the participant. This allowed the interviewee the freedom to talk and
167 ascribe meanings while bearing in mind the broader aims of the study (Smith, 2008).
168 Interview questions were open-ended to allow the respondent considerable scope to express
169 their perceptions and expand on views offered (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). Prior to data
170 collection, a pilot interview was conducted with an assistant coach from a professional soccer
171 academy. Following this process, no significant changes were made to the actual interview
172 guide, although the phrasing of two questions were refined for clarity.

173 The final interview guide (available upon request from the first author) was structured
174 into three sections: ice-breakers, main questions, and concluding questions (Rubin & Rubin,
175 2005). After asking participants to provide general demographic information, the ice-breaker

176 questions were designed to ascertain a basic understanding of the individual and their
177 coaching experience. These questions were posed in a conversational manner and included
178 asking participants to describe their sport, the athletes within the academy setting, and the
179 specific environment (e.g., To begin, I would like to get to know more about your coaching
180 role). The main section focused on effort distribution and adopted a scenario-based
181 approach, whereby participants were asked to imagine three ‘typical’ athletes in their
182 academy squad: the hard worker, the average athlete, and one who lacks commitment/a work
183 ethic. With very little variation across participants, these categories were reported as 30%,
184 40%, and 30% respectively.

185 For each scenario a number of questions were posed (e.g., Could you describe how
186 hard they work? Can you give me some examples that demonstrate this? What percentage of
187 your squad are like this? Can you talk me through some of the methods you use to encourage
188 commitment with your athletes?). A variety of probe and elaboration questions were
189 employed to ensure complete understanding of respondents’ comments and enable in-depth
190 answers to be obtained (Malterud, 2001). For concluding questions, participants were asked
191 to reflect on their responses, and if they had anything else to add. Throughout the interviews,
192 participants were encouraged to provide examples and discuss specific events that had
193 occurred during their academy coaching experiences.

194 **Procedure**

195 Participants were invited to take part via email or face-to-face correspondence, both
196 of which included information regarding the aims and requirements of the study and all
197 ethical procedures. In an attempt to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, it was made
198 clear that all identifiable information would be removed, and pseudonyms would be used in
199 any future publication (see table 1). All of the interviews were conducted by the second

200 author, face to face and at a location of the participant's choosing, lasting for a mean of 66.14
201 min ($SD = 10.21$).

202 **Data Analysis**

203 All interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed verbatim.
204 A six-stage inductive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was then
205 conducted by the lead author on the transcripts. In the first instance, transcripts were read
206 and reread in their entirety until the lead author was familiar with the content, noting down
207 initial ideas in order to gain an overall sense of the dataset. The second phase involved
208 generating initial codes which identified key features or points of interest within the
209 transcripts. Once data were coded, the third element consisted of collating codes into
210 potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each theme. The fourth stage included the
211 second and third authors as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018) reviewing the entire
212 dataset, with further development and refinement of themes to ensure meaningful
213 representations of the data, for example, debating whether trying to fit too much into a theme
214 at times and discussing where themes overlap. During the fifth phase, final refinements were
215 made, generating clear names for each theme to accurately reflect the description and how
216 they fitted into an overall story in relation to the purpose of the research. The analytic
217 process continued throughout the final stage through the drafting of written reports. The
218 reports were read by the co-authors who served to encourage further reflection and ensure a
219 balance was achieved between data extracts and analytical commentary (Braun et al., 2017).

220 **Methodological Rigor**

221 Qualitative research should be judged against criteria that align with the specific
222 methodology employed in each study (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Accordingly, a number of
223 steps were integrated into this study to enhance the methodological rigor. Firstly, Braun and
224 Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist of criteria for determining good thematic analysis was

225 adhered to. These included items relating to the transcription, coding, analysis, overall
226 process, and the written report. Member reflections offered by participants, were also
227 employed as a way to help create a meticulous, robust, and intellectually enriched
228 understanding (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This involved dialogue with the participants
229 following analysis to explore any gaps or similarities they shared, concerning interpretations
230 of the findings (Schinke, McGannon, & Smith, 2013). Lastly, the first author engaged with
231 critical friends (second and third authors) from the fourth-stage of thematic analysis, who
232 encouraged reflection upon and questioned the emerging interpretations of the data (Smith &
233 McGannon, 2018).

234

Results

235 A range of experiences influenced the academy coaches' perceptions of commitment
236 in their developing athletes. Three major themes were elicited within the inductive analysis
237 and are presented with representative verbatim quotes: a) what do we want? b) what are they
238 like? and c) what do we do? (see table 2).

239 **What Do We Want?**

240 In this theme, participants discussed the qualities pertaining to the committed athlete
241 within their academy structures. Specifically, two sub themes emerged: characteristics of the
242 'ideal' athlete and balancing the performance and winning focus.

243 **Characteristics of the 'ideal' athlete.** The academy athletes in question all met
244 various physical and technical standards to be selected into these high-performance
245 environments. Interestingly, coaches discussed how the character of the athletes was right at
246 the heart of what they are looking for: "So if we get the character right that's what our
247 priority is, we need to develop the character" (Aaron, Badminton). This was also exemplified
248 at the organizational level, where Ben (Soccer) highlighted his academy ethos:

249 Our academy is about the person before the player, because at a young age we try and
250 want them to be humble, hardworking, respectful, and genuinely good characters.

251 Obviously, that isn't always the case but that's what we aim for.

252 With regards to character, there was unanimous agreement on the qualities coaches
253 wanted to see in their developing athletes: "You know discipline, respect, commitment,
254 appreciation of values" (Tom, Cricket). These defining features of the hardworking and
255 committed athlete were irrespective of sport and emphasized as a key characteristic, not only
256 at the academy level, but also if these athletes were to have a subsequently successful career:
257 "High levels of commitment are completely necessary in order to fit into the broader culture
258 of the club and are especially important when it comes to transition to first team" (Jack,
259 Rugby Union).

260 Underpinning this notion of sustained development, participants noted how their best
261 athletes: "... take ownership for everything they do" (Gary, Rugby League). This consisted
262 of coaches stressing the importance of developing independence within their athletes:
263 "Autonomous and takes enough responsibility for their development as we get them to be
264 self-regulating athletes" (Jack, Rugby Union). However, a noteworthy take on this was
265 highlighted by David (Judo) in that, in order to take responsibility for their personal
266 development, athletes needed to utilize the various support services on offer to them:

267 The best ones in this place are the ones that make use of this place as a whole, use the
268 psychologist, the nutritionist, the physios, use the S&C guys, they're less dependent
269 as in the fact that they'll hunt and source these service for themselves. They're
270 realizing that they can't do it on their own.

271 **Balancing the performance and winning focus.** In the second sub-theme,
272 participants discussed the reality that their athletes were on a developmental journey: "The
273 process along the way what would get you that step up the ladder. We say Olympic golds at

274 the top of the ladder, you're not gonna do it in one go, so we try to chunk it down" (Mark,
275 Swimming). Due to the academy nature of these environments, the importance of the
276 processes and learning opportunities for these developing athletes was conversed: "You get a
277 sense of the ones that are fully focused and switched on to doing it...you can see they've got
278 a real passion to learn and wanna improve" (John, Soccer). It was apparent participants
279 advocated both outcome and process-based types of focus and the key was achieving the right
280 balance between the two:

281 Players that are result orientated worry me, they gotta be competitive as hell and
282 that's the balance, so I want players that are out there developing; they know what
283 they've gotta do every time they walk on the tennis court, they know what they're
284 trying to do to improve. (Nathan, Tennis)

285 Moreover, there was an undisputed opinion from coaches not to underplay the
286 performance side of sport, winning is inherently important. Thus, all interviewed wanted this
287 balance between results today and development for tomorrow:

288 I think they're getting used to the fact they don't just rely on the end score; this is not
289 first team football this is not results driven business. Don't get me wrong, I wanna
290 win every football game but not if at the same time they're making mistakes for fun
291 and the other team's not good enough to punish us, I don't think you should as a
292 coach ever come away and go yeah, we was great today we won 5-0. (James, Soccer)

293 **What Are They Like?**

294 As opposed to discussing the type of athletes participants ideally wanted, the next
295 theme concerned the reality of what coaches were actually getting within their academy
296 environments, with three sub themes emerging: relationship between commitment and talent,
297 maturity or lack of, and what's driving these athletes?

298 **Relationship between commitment and talent.** A recurring theme was apparent
299 across all participants regarding the perceived relationship between commitment and talent:
300 Majority of them are committed and hardworking, however you have the ones that
301 aren't and unfortunately, they're often the ones that are the very talented, the
302 mavericks if you like; they're the ones that could make the top level. (Ben, Soccer)
303 This was in contrast to the ideal characteristics previously discussed, with participants
304 observing less than favorable attributes in many of their most talented athletes: "If I had to
305 name the top 10 players I've ever coached, I'd probably say three or four of them you could
306 deem as lazy" (John, Soccer). From a more global perspective, Paul (Rugby League) spoke
307 about this being part and parcel of all youth sport: "There's so much talent with these kids,
308 but I think whatever environment you have, the best in the world or the worst, I think you'll
309 always get them individuals".

310 Discussing the reasons for this lack of commitment, participants were passionate in
311 their perceived underlying causes:

312 The problem is 'cos of the talent, we're talking about (names club) it's because the
313 talent is exceptional. At that given time and as an under 16-year-old they're not just a
314 good player, they're bordering best in the country or the top 10 in Europe and they
315 become aware of that because of everything that surrounds them. (John, Soccer)

316 It was acknowledged that, because of this exceptional talent, academy players may
317 have already started to reap the rewards without being fully committed: "They think getting
318 picked in the academy is the be all and end all; no it's not, it's irrelevant; it's just an
319 opportunity for you to step to the next level" (Tom, Cricket). The nature of the academy
320 programmes being full-time was deemed an influential factor in this relationship, with
321 coaches perceiving youth athletes becoming a bit blasé: "The early professionalization for me
322 is because they're in academy too soon and it becomes a norm... You get in the academy now

323 it's harder to get out than get in" (Ben, Soccer). Similarly, coaches expressed their frustration
324 with having to commit to individuals earlier on: "Familiarity can breed complacency and they
325 can get comfortable and content; this is just what we do every day" (John, Soccer). Gary
326 (Rugby League) resonated with this from his coaching experience, where problems were
327 perceived to result from athletes not wanting to put the work in that is required at this level:
328 "If I'm honest with you I don't think they wanna work hard enough, that's the issue". This
329 was further emphasized as a lack of self-awareness of what is required, with some athletes
330 not committed to applying themselves outside of their scheduled training:

331 They believe that walking through the door here twice a day and just getting in and
332 going through the motions is enough to get them to the top and it's not. That's four
333 out of 24 hours a day, it's what you're doing in those other 20 hours. (Mark,
334 Swimming)

335 Coaches gave an honest insight into how it affected them to see this lack of
336 commitment in some of their most talented athletes:

337 Very disappointing to a point where I get too frustrated with the fact they're not
338 working hard. Can't see why they wouldn't when they've got all the trappings that
339 they could have from all the rewards for hard work. 'Cos the ones that I'm talking
340 about, they're the ones that have the talent to actually get to the top. (Ryan, Soccer)

341 For David (Judo), a similar emotive response was shared in relation to some of his most
342 talented athletes missing training sessions: "Will go and pick up medals still, but not done the
343 work, not done the graft for it, and that to me is upsetting because I think Christ what could
344 you be like if you did do that?" The feelings of upset, disappointment, and frustration
345 expressed by the coaches led Mark (Swimming) to admit: "I'd rather have a less talented but
346 totally committed athlete in the group than somebody who's got all the talent in the world but
347 doesn't want to invest". As a thought-provoking point to this sub theme, Ben (Soccer)

348 questioned whether you are likely to see any improvements with the lesser committed
349 athletes: “I’m not a specialist in behaviors, but when I see kids at 14, 15, 16 and they’re lazy,
350 they’re arrogant, they’re not hard working, you can guarantee they’ll be the same at 25, 26,
351 27, 28”.

352 **Maturity or lack of!** Participants repeatedly reported there was not a lack of ability
353 or talent in their academy athletes. Instead: “There is a lack of maturity in how that player
354 operates, how independent he is, how much the parent runs their lives, make decisions, does
355 everything for them” (Tom, Cricket). This was in contrast to earlier descriptions of the ideal
356 characteristics, whereby coaches promoted the development of independence in their athletes.
357 However, whether the parents of these athletes were also promoting independence was
358 frequently questioned by the coaches: “They want them to do well, but sometimes they have
359 to let go of them and say find your feet, make some decisions on how you’re gonna operate
360 on your own” (Paul, Rugby League). In relation to this lack of independence, coaches also
361 shared reflections when taking their athletes to tournaments:

362 That’s probably one thing I look at when I go to overseas junior events, I will feel that
363 our players are just a little bit behind on a maturity level. I just see Europeans a bit
364 more self-assured, a bit more worldliness about them.

365 Nathan (Tennis) acknowledged that, although this could be a generalization, he also
366 had observed British players being less independent and maturing later in comparison to their
367 European counterparts. Again, parents were deemed influential in these levels of maturity:
368 “You want great parental support, but they can’t wrap them in cotton wool. It’s tough for
369 parents because this day and age they want to, and duty of care and stuff is huge now”
370 (Nathan, Tennis). One of the perceived issues with this lack of maturity was expressed by
371 James (Soccer): “You’re trying to make boys realize but no matter how many times you say
372 or the type of message you give them, some of them just literally won’t pick it up until they

373 mature". This had implications for the coaches in terms of their athletes not taking on board
374 the information they were trying to convey. When considering the purpose of the academy
375 set-ups across the respective sports, a potential shortcoming was highlighted due to this:

376 There's an immaturity in some of our players, they don't work out what you want
377 them to work out as a 15, 16, 17 year old, it may take them until they're 22, 23, 24.
378 The trouble is at 22, 23, 24 they've been bypassed, or their moment's gone. (Tom,
379 Cricket)

380 **What's driving these athletes?** A clear sport divide was apparent when participants
381 discussed the motives driving their athletes. Only the soccer coaches referred to the
382 "financial benefits" (Ryan, Soccer) and external sources:

383 Nowadays it's changed massively I think fame, but that's instant fame, instant likes
384 on social media, liked by a million followers on Twitter, I wanna be a millionaire,
385 and I want the best girlfriend on my arm. Great if that's what's driving you in training
386 every day go and do it, but it can't be detrimental to your training. (Ben, Soccer)

387 Due to the perceived rewards and external benefits, the soccer coaches also recounted
388 peculiar motives within their sport, stemming from socio-economic influences: "We've
389 worked with players that have come from horrible backgrounds that are probably getting
390 driven by wanting better for the people around them" (John).

391 In contrast, coaches from the other team sports described more internal motives
392 driving their athletes: "It won't be money; at the start when they first come in, it's that love of
393 the game, enjoy playing, they wanna be with their mates" (Tom, Cricket). From an
394 individual sport perspective, Aaron (Badminton) spoke about the personal achievements and
395 medal opportunities driving his athletes at European, World, and Olympic level: "That's what
396 it means to them and that's what it means to us, so the sport in itself recognizes that, it
397 doesn't recognize the financial gain". Personal achievements were also brought to life by

398 David (Judo), who emphasized the importance of a task orientation, such as effort and skill
399 development: “There are no external motivations; you do it to achieve your own goal, your
400 own gratification; you wanna be as great as you can be as a person in that sport as an athlete”.

401 Participants further expanded these explanations of what was driving their athletes,
402 concluding that: “If I’m honest I don’t care really as long as I know what motivates them”
403 (Gary, Rugby League). This notion of taking the time to understand the individual athlete,
404 regardless of the sport, was supported by James (Soccer):

405 They’re all individual, part of the challenge as a coach is to find out what drives him,
406 it makes your job easier. But there are also some lads that have an inner drive that
407 might be something that you know nothing about...but at the same time I think some
408 of them are not driven at all.

409 **What Do We Do?**

410 The next theme aimed to understand the different strategies coaches employed to either
411 deal with the characteristics associated with a lack of commitment or promote the ideal
412 behaviors in their academy athletes. Four sub themes were as follows: use of role models,
413 good old-fashioned honesty, punishment versus praise, and sending messages their way.

414 **Use of role models.** A variation was evident between coaches using high-profile
415 athletes within the academy set-ups. From one end of the continuum, Nathan (Tennis)
416 mentioned a high-profile athlete he uses within his sport: “We’ve been fortunate enough to
417 have Andy Murray as our big role model over the past sort of 10 years now and Andy is
418 known for being one of the most committed athletes out there”. High-profile role models
419 were considered to have a greater impact, in terms of the important messages coaches wanted
420 to get across to their athletes: “Bring someone in who’s been there and done it, who the
421 athlete respects and looks up to, and same event they swim, to sit down and try and tease

422 those things out of them” (Mark, Swimming). Alternatively, the following quote depicts
423 reasoning for coaches using different levels of role models:

424 We’d use a lot of senior role models and by senior I don’t always just mean (names
425 ex-player); it’s players that are in the year above or two years above in the academy,
426 so a closer level to them. I think sometimes the elite examples are too high. (John,
427 Soccer)

428 Coaches shared experiences where they had selected athletes from the age group
429 above, with the aim of demonstrating the hard work and commitment characteristics required
430 in the sport: “You just create a situation where they are working alongside; they might see the
431 difference, they witness it and experience it” (Aaron, Badminton). Building on from this,
432 John (Soccer) gave an example from his coaching practice where he purposefully pairs up a
433 hard-working athlete with another from the same age group, whose mentality he would class
434 as lazy, in the hope that the committed player influences them. “I think you’ve gotta drop in
435 little things that influence as opposed to change, I think it’s very difficult to change people,
436 you’ve just gotta influence their behavior”. A similar sentiment was expressed by Nathan
437 (Tennis) as something he spends time contemplating when selecting players for training
438 camps: “Surrounding them with the right type of players, for me is critical, they’re role
439 models in their own right. Players with not so good characteristics they hopefully imitate
440 those players”. This notion of changing players’ characteristics through imitation, led some
441 coaches to admit it was even worth keeping players contracted because of their influence:
442 “Three or four in each age group that are never gonna make it at our club, they might not
443 even make it the next level down, but what they are gonna do is help the other lads” (Ben,
444 Soccer).

445 **Good old-fashioned honesty.** Another key approach which coaches advocated

446 within their environments was the importance of being honest with their athletes: “There’s a
447 huge amount of honesty coming out from me, and from our staff cos you know it’d be
448 difficult not to deliver in a similar way” (Tom, Cricket). This was reiterated by James
449 (Soccer) as a necessary step in trying to change his players’ behaviors: “Being up front and
450 honest with lads and telling them when they ain’t doing it is certainly the way that I would
451 always work, the more you skate around it the longer it’ll go on”. Aaron (Badminton) went
452 on to describe how he tries to understand the individual athlete by having a number of honest
453 conversations:

454 We agree this person’s lazy then you have a conversation and find out something
455 completely different is happening in their life, which is manifesting itself in the
456 appearance of laziness. So, you go back to trying to understand the person and the
457 character rather than just diving into what the issue is.

458 An association to being honest with their athletes was also made by the coaches with
459 regard to the reality of progressing from the academy set-up: “We have to keep reminding
460 them of that reality as well; you need to let them know that obviously to be a player at (names
461 club) that is going to be very few and far between” (James, Soccer). This was also used with
462 players who were consistently demonstrating a lack of commitment within their current
463 academy environment: “You know if this isn’t fucking stopping you’re gonna be away from
464 (names club) don’t think it’s gonna be easy when you leave here”. Ben (Soccer) described
465 this as the shock tactic and something he reverts to as a last resort if other strategies have not
466 had the required impact. As an adjunct to this, Ryan (Soccer) explained he used this reality
467 check as a motivational tool: “You also need to remind them that the opportunity to be a
468 footballer is right in front of them because they’re already on the ladder”. Ryan further
469 stressed the importance of coaches reminding their players, regardless of the sport, that this
470 opportunity is within their grasp.

471 **Punishment versus praise.** Within the academy environments, all the soccer
472 coaches implemented physical punishments with the aim to change their athletes' behaviors
473 and made these sanctions either individual or team based for their respective sport. An
474 example of a team-based sanction was described by John (Soccer): "It's a set of line runs
475 with clap press ups in between, basically something that physically is horrible, no one enjoys
476 it, the whole team does it". Ryan (Soccer) provided an interesting take on this, adopted from
477 the military: "If for example, somebody is letting the team down, the rest of the team gets
478 punished to do extra work. He isn't involved and has to watch it from outside". Conversely,
479 coaches from the other sports did not support the use of physical punishment, believing it to
480 either be a waste of time: "There's no learning in that, there's nothing new" (David, Judo) or
481 as Jack (Rugby Union) explained: "When is training hard ever gonna be a punishment? That
482 should be just what we do around here". The coaches' recounted that their experiences were,
483 in part, influenced by the poor performances or attitudes of their players. Gary (Rugby
484 League) discussed how, following a defeat which he attributed to a lack of commitment,
485 instead of physical punishment, he got the whole rugby team to complete jobs around the
486 training ground: "It's that message of we need to show working hard, what they're going to
487 be doing with their lives if they're not applying themselves. So, there's a message behind it".
488 Finally, Tom (Cricket) debated what he could take away from his cricketers that might affect
489 them enough to change their behavior: "I hate pulling players out of games because that's
490 what we play for, I've probably got the ultimate sanction is remove them from the
491 programme, but that's like the end of the road".

492 Conversely, the coaches reflected how it's just as important to praise their players as
493 it is to punish or let them know when they are not doing something correctly: "It's
494 encouraging and praising them I think at the right times" (Nathan, Tennis). This transpired as
495 the athletes feeling like they have been rewarded for their behaviors: "Showing some reward

496 and generally it is only positive feedback of we like what you're doing" (Paul, Rugby
497 League). James (Soccer) also stressed the important of praising his players, but extended this
498 by ensuring the individual knows why they are receiving this acclaim:

499 It's just as important to praise the ones that are leading by example, are always on
500 time, whether it'll be praise in front of the group, team selection, certain perks of the
501 group, you need to make sure that you do reward them in whatever way you see fit,
502 but at the same time make sure that it's known what reason it's for.

503 **Sending messages their way.** Across the different sports, coaches expressed the
504 importance of staying up to date with technology in terms of how they were communicating
505 with their academy athletes: "I think kids are all social media... visually learning,
506 communication is at its peak. They're always texting, so we do a lot of video stuff with
507 them" (Ben, Soccer). Potentially due to the age of the academy athletes, the use of video was
508 a key aid in how coaches are trying to get their messages across:

509 This generation of players learn through watching, the slightly older ones they don't
510 actually like watching themselves...It's interesting the younger ones wanna watch
511 themselves all the time, that's how they learn. The most powerful report I do now is
512 not a written report it's video footage, show that's the way you do it. (Nathan, Tennis)

513 In addition to the athletes watching themselves, coaches also searched for video
514 footage across different sports that represented commitment, or the associated characteristics:

515 We'll have a little browse on YouTube where you go oh that's decent just fire it
516 round...Receiving a four-minute video on WhatsApp is their world as opposed to
517 come and sit in a class room and look at a big screen I think. (John, Soccer)

518 A different use of WhatsApp was described by Jack (Rugby Union) with one of his
519 players who struggled to be self-disciplined: "At the end of each day he'll send over what
520 he's done...I suppose as a result of feeling like he needed somebody standing over him and

521 telling him what to do”. Jack did reflect on this clearly not being the end result of what they
522 aim for with their players however: “This WhatsApp group was used as a bit of a scaffold to
523 help him”.

524 On the flip side to all the positives of technology, John (Soccer) highlighted how
525 social media could undo or promote contrasting messages to his academy athletes:

526 We work in a world where you go on Twitter or Instagram after a game and a player
527 could’ve had an absolute stinker and straight away what you see is hundreds or
528 thousands of comments from supporters going brilliant performance tonight.

529 Responding to this, John went on to explain that he would sit down with the player
530 and spend time showing video evidence to counteract these comments: “I’ll show you it and
531 go no that is not it and that will always trump; if he doesn’t see it then he’s got no chance in
532 the game”. As a summary to the different strategies presented, Ben (Soccer) provided a
533 pertinent conclusion regarding the idiosyncratic nature of the youth performers he coaches:

534 You’ve just gotta find out what works for the lad in my opinion and try and take away
535 your own beliefs in it because not everyone’s gonna have the same beliefs as me.

536 We’re not all made the same and so yeah you gotta find what works for the kid.

537 **Discussion**

538 The current study aimed to obtain academy coaches’ perceptions regarding
539 commitment in their developing athletes. Given, National Governing Body (NGB) and
540 professional sporting organization initiatives to produce world-class performers, this is a
541 pivotal time for athletes to negotiate key developmental opportunities. Therefore, appropriate
542 levels of commitment are seen as fundamental to the adolescent athlete, if they are to be
543 successful in progressing through their high-performance pathway or professional academy
544 structures. Findings have subsequently provided an intuitive insight to the perceived levels of
545 commitment and associated behaviors across a range of sporting environments. Overall, the

546 interviews revealed a consistent message regarding the differences between the ideal
547 commitment characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete, which accordingly
548 influenced the strategies coaches employed.

549 With this in mind, there was unanimous agreement across the participants regarding
550 the defining features of the hardworking and committed athlete, including being humble,
551 respectful, disciplined, having an appreciation of values, taking ownership for development,
552 and genuinely being good characters. These characteristics have previously been identified
553 as positive features of the development process (e.g., Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Gould et
554 al., 2002). Moreover, it was encouraging to see the coaches in this study emphasizing and
555 conversing the importance of the processes and learning opportunities for their developing
556 athletes, while finding the balance with a results orientation (cf. Duda, 2001; Harwood &
557 Beauchamp, 2007). However, whether each of the high-performance pathway or professional
558 academies successfully promoted these positive characteristics and environments was an
559 interesting topic of discussion by the participants. For instance, cultural and organizational
560 differences (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) were apparent across the sports with regards to
561 their set-ups, coaching practices, athletes, and specific motives and rewards. These
562 idiosyncrasies may provide reasons why some environments seemed to work better than
563 others in facilitating the committed athlete. The soccer coaches, for example, noted how the
564 early specialization (players are recruited to soccer academies at age eight, i.e., as under
565 nine's) and full-time nature of their programmes was deemed an influential factor in some of
566 their athletes becoming complacent, blasé, and already perceiving to reap the rewards without
567 being fully committed. This therefore highlights a wider issue for the NGBs and professional
568 sporting organizations, regarding the impact of their current structure and practices for
569 developing the next generation of athlete.

570 Across these high-performance environments, there was a recurring theme regarding
571 the relationship between the most talented athletes displaying the least committed attitudes
572 and behaviors. Specifically, coaches expressed consistent emotive responses of upset,
573 disappointment, and frustration when seeing their athletes potentially squander development
574 opportunities by engaging in maladaptive behaviors and challenging attitudes. According to
575 the sport commitment model (Scanlan et al., 1993), enjoyment, affiliation, challenge, and
576 rewards are commonly cited as reasons for participating in competitive sport. Conversely,
577 developing athletes who believe ability leads to success rather than effort have been linked to
578 less adaptive responses such as, boredom, negative attitudes, and a lack of enjoyment (e.g.,
579 Carpenter & Morgan, 1999; Weiss et al., 2010). Offering an additional explanation, the
580 adolescent athlete experiences maturational imbalances between the development of
581 socioemotional and cognitive control systems, leading them to exhibit less than desirable
582 behaviors (Schnell et al., 2014; Steinberg, 2010). Similar to this study's findings, previous
583 researchers have also discovered the combination of the developing adolescent and high-
584 performance expectations have led to athletes displaying challenging behaviors, emotional
585 unpredictability, vulnerability, and commitment issues (Devaney et al., 2018; Hill, et al.,
586 2015; Morris et al., 2016). It would seem sensible for coaches engaged at this level to receive
587 knowledge and support focused on dealing with these challenges; arguably a more important
588 issue than the technical/tactical emphasis which characterizes many coach education
589 schemes.

590 In a similar vein, a discrepancy was apparent between the coaches' ideal characteristic
591 of independence and the lack of maturity they encountered in their academy athletes. Due to
592 the ages of these developing athletes, parents were unsurprisingly deemed influential in this
593 characteristic (Côté, 1999; Holt & Dunn, 2004). Researchers have tended to focus on the
594 broad contribution of parents to the development of talented athletes, in addition to specific

595 positive (supportive) and negative (pressurizing) influences on children's psychosocial
596 experiences (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2015; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010).
597 However, as Dorsch, Smith, and Dotterer (2016) identified, the distinction between
598 pressuring behaviors as negative and supportive behaviors as positive, is not necessarily as
599 straight-forward a dichotomy as it seems. For example, the coaches in this study discussed
600 how seemingly positive supportive parents contributed to their developing athletes
601 demonstrating a lack of maturity in how they operate, an inability to take on board messages,
602 a lack of independence to make their own decisions, and not taking ownership for their
603 development. Sporting parents may therefore need to facilitate developing levels of
604 independence, beyond their child's physical maturation years, if they are to successfully
605 transition to senior sport (Schnell et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2015). Although
606 researchers have begun to study the complexities and challenges of being a sport parent (e.g.,
607 Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017), this warrants an interesting avenue for future research
608 investigation. It may be that parenting a performer requires a subtly different skillset to that
609 needed to parent a child! A particular issue in the face of the growing number of commercial
610 providers of parent support.

611 Of course, addressing these derailment issues is best addressed as a total environment
612 challenge. For example, the impact of talented academy athletes exhibiting less than
613 desirable behaviors, missing development opportunities, and maturing beyond their key
614 transition periods, raises important implications for sport psychologists working within these
615 high-performance environments. This firstly might include raising awareness of what is
616 required across the development pathways and secondly to try and modify these challenging/
617 maladaptive attitudes and behaviors; both perhaps best attempted at pre-adolescent ages.
618 From an applied sport psychology perspective, the cognitive-behavioral model has frequently
619 been cited as the predominant approach within this field (e.g., Fortin-Guichard et al. 2018;

620 McArdle & Moore, 2012; Winter & Collins, 2015). The approach lends itself to the issues
621 identified by the coaches in this study, in that the cognitive-behavioral model advocates
622 allocating appropriate techniques to focus on both changes in problem behavior and
623 transforming maladaptive cognitions to those that are readily adaptable (Burton & Raedeke,
624 2008). This is certainly the idea which underpins approaches such as the Psychological
625 Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDEs – MacNamara et al., 2010) where skills are
626 taught, tested, and refined as an explicit part of the developmental curriculum. Concerningly,
627 however, participants noted how they had habitually seen these maladaptive attitudes and
628 behaviors remaining unchanged in the athletes they coached. It is outside the scope of this
629 research, to comment whether sport psychology provision was currently in place within each
630 of these high-performance environments. Alternatively, whether consultation was focused at
631 a group or organizational level and hence sufficient time was not allocated to facilitate
632 individual consultation and subsequent behavior change to occur. Regardless, it warrants the
633 sporting organizations and sport psychology community to reflect on their current support
634 programmes and consider the nuances of working with the talented adolescence athlete.
635 Future research would therefore benefit from case studies examples, where practitioners have
636 successfully impacted on commitment issues and subsequent modification of maladaptive
637 behaviors and attitudes.

638 Regarding the reported strategies by the coaches, an interesting finding was the use of
639 technology in the ‘sending messages their way’ sub theme of this study. With increases in
640 social media use, it can be perceived as a negative distraction, however the coaches in this
641 study embraced technological advancements to communicate with their academy athletes
642 (e.g., Gould, Nalepa, & Mignano, 2019). This included the use of WhatsApp, YouTube, and
643 video, for disseminating specific sporting footage to represent commitment and associated
644 characteristics, as supporting evidence for athlete development, and as a platform for coaches

645 to convey their messages. Sport psychologists working within these high-performance
646 pathway or professional academy environments often use educational workshops as their
647 mode of delivery (Sharp, Woodcock, Holland, Cumming, & Duda, 2013). Workshops enable
648 an educational platform from which to stage a discursive environment focused on sport
649 psychology skills and techniques (Gould, Petlichkoff, Hodge, & Simons, 1990;
650 Poczwardowski & Lauer, 2006). However, interestingly, some of the coaches highlighted
651 how receiving a short video on WhatsApp is more suited to the adolescent athlete than the
652 traditional method of sitting in a classroom for a 40-minute to 1-hour educational workshop.
653 This, therefore, may be an opportune time and demographic for sport psychology
654 practitioners to embrace the use of technology within their applied work (e.g., Murphy 2009;
655 Pitt et al., 2015).

656 A final finding was the strategic way coaches used role models within their
657 performance environments. In addition to high-profile sporting role models,
658 coaches discussed how they would purposefully create situations whereby their athletes work
659 alongside or be paired-up with a hard-working athlete in the hope their commitment attitudes
660 and behaviors would have a positive influence. Most often called observational learning,
661 modeling, imitation, or vicarious experience, this is a process of observing the actions of
662 another person and subsequently adapting one's own actions accordingly (e.g., McCullough,
663 Law, & Ste Marie, 2012). In offering further insight to applied practitioners, coaches
664 reported how they would retain or keep less talented athletes contracted, based on their
665 influential mentality. In his account of social learning theory, Bandura (1977) noted that
666 unlike imitation, observational learning is characterized by enduring changes in an
667 individual's actions. For this to occur, Bandura proposed four underlying functions: the
668 learner should pay attention to relevant information; that retention of the information should
669 occur; the desired behavior should be accurately reproduced; and there should be adequate

670 motivation to do so. Therefore, according to this theory, attentional processes play a pivotal
671 role if athletes are to learn and be influenced through observation. Mere exposure to a
672 committed and hard-working athlete does not guarantee any adoption or enduring changes in
673 an individual's actions, especially if there is a lack of desire to do so (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja,
674 2002). It would, therefore, be pragmatic for future researchers to test this empirically within
675 different sporting environments.

676 While the present study exemplifies a range of interesting findings regarding academy
677 coaches' perceptions of commitment in their developing athletes, it is not without limitations.
678 It is apparent that, although there are many idiosyncrasies in different sports, there are also
679 many similarities. Nevertheless, the results of this study must be considered within the
680 sporting environments the coaches were employed and do not necessarily represent the
681 experiences of all UK academy environments or high-performance pathways (Lyle, 2018).
682 Given that the social environment and, by extension, the cultural milieu can play a significant
683 role, it would be worth future research exploring the extent that these findings are
684 generalizable to other countries, cultural contexts, and indeed other sports (e.g., aesthetic
685 sports, for example). Coaches and applied practitioners intending to use these findings to
686 impact their delivery, should therefore bear this in mind. On the other hand, Carradice,
687 Shankland, and Beail (2002) believe that, when considering a qualitative study, the research
688 should be evaluated by the applicability of the concepts to other situations and to others
689 involved in the phenomenon. We therefore propose 'naturalistic generalizability' (Smith,
690 2018) and encourage readers to make connections where appropriate, look for overlaps in
691 their own sporting environments, and selectively transfer the applicable findings.

692 Limitations notwithstanding, this study provides a valuable insight into the
693 perspective of academy coaches regarding commitment in their developing athletes. We
694 highlight this as an important area of focus for sporting organizations, researchers,

695 practitioners, parents, and coaches who aim to support their athletes negotiate key
696 developmental opportunities and successfully progress to senior sport. Findings have
697 outlined pertinent differences between the ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of
698 the adolescent athlete, along with current strategies coaches are employing within their
699 practice. Specifically, by adding to the understanding and persistence of this issue, we hope
700 practitioners can use the information to tailor their interventions and service provision
701 accordingly. As one of several examples, practitioners might consider how they might
702 develop *and* deploy mental skills and environmental parameters to help athletes achieve well
703 operationalized desirable behaviors (cf. Collins, MacNamara, & Cruikshank, 2018).

704 Finally, by adopting a cross-sport approach, we offer NGBs an opportunity to look
705 outside their own sporting organizations in seeking best practice recommendations. The
706 similarity of challenge across the sports examined, against the varied approaches used to
707 address it, would suggest great benefit in coaches sharing ideas and practice across similar
708 domains as well as within their own sporting pathways.

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