Getting to Know Your Athletes: Strengthening the Coach-Athlete Dyad Using an Integrative Personality Framework

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Abstract

The quality of the coach-athlete relationship is important to athlete development and overall performance in sport. To better enable coaches to foster this relationship, this study was designed to utilize an integrative personality framework (McAdams, 2013) to gain a deeper, more contextualized understanding of the athlete. Using a case study approach, two Division III collegiate soccer players completed a three-part survey that profiled these individuals as a social actor (layer one), motivated agent (layer two), and autobiographical author (layer three). Results are presented for each athlete, yielding rich, yet different, personality profiles. These profiles identify particular traits, motives, and personal stories that uniquely shape the personalities of these individuals. We discuss the efficacy of using McAdams’ framework as a guiding structure for helping elite coaches better understand their athletes and, subsequently, further develop the coach-athlete relationship. We also discuss the use of McAdams’ framework in the sport context and how it might provide useful insights for advancing the psychological profiling of athletes.

Keywords: personality in sport, coach-athlete relationships, coaching, athlete profiling
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Although the pressure for coaches and teams to win increases at elite levels of sport (i.e., collegiate and above), the coaching literature supports the notion that coaching effectiveness and success are more than just win-loss records (Côté, Young, Duffy, & North, 2007; International Sport Coaching Framework, 2012; Mallett & Côté, 2006). For example, the International Sport Coaching Framework (2012) states that “Coaching effectiveness is gauged by the consistency with which positive outcomes for athletes and teams are achieved, reflected only in part by competitive success” (p. 10). These positive outcomes include when coaches focus on athletes having fun and developing social competency, provide deliberate practice and preparation for competition, transfer appropriate skills and competencies (e.g., technical, tactical, physical, mental) to meet the athletes’ needs, and develop a strong and mutually dependent coach-athlete relationship (Becker, 2009, Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Jowett, 2005; Naylor, 2006, Philippe & Seiler, 2006).

The International Sport Coaching Framework (2012) lists Build Relationships as one of six functional coaching competencies. Research has shown that athletes appreciate coaches who are able to create and balance a social and professional relationship (Becker, 2009). Furthermore, the quality of coach-athlete relationships is said to be important to athletic success (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung, 2002; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Mallett, 2005) and impacts the social and identity development of the athlete (Cronin & Allen, 2015; Fletcher & Scott, 2010). A coach with an ability to form an emotional alliance with his or her athletes may create a culture that values a shared effort towards a common goal (Jowett, 2005; Philippe & Seiler, 2006). These relationships are also thought to underpin team cohesion (Jowett, 2007) and are described through constructs such as closeness, co-orientation, and complementarity (Jowett, 2003). Considering team cohesion has a significant positive effect on team performance (Carron,
Colman, & Wheeler, 2002; Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985; Kleinert et al., 2012; Mullen & Copper, 1994), any attempts made by coaches to build strong coach-athlete bonds seems highly appropriate and recommended.

To foster positive coach-athlete relationships, coaching often involves gaining a deep understanding of each individual performer and how this performer is potentially similar, yet different, to others (e.g., in motivation; Kluckhohn & Murray, 1953). Likewise, athletes want to get to know their coaches and foster a mutual understanding between each other (Becker, 2009). But, how do coaches get to know their athletes at a deep level of understanding? This question warrants further attention in coaching science as there is limited research exploring how coaches get to know their athletes. This inquiry also focuses on a much broader issue concerning how athletes are psychologically profiled in sport and the type of information that is judged to be particularly important. Specifically, in light of contemporary perspectives in personality psychology (McAdams, 2013) and sport psychology literature (Coulter, Mallett, Singer, & Gucciardi, 2016; Mallett & Coulter, 2016), this study takes a holistic approach in getting to know athletes and discusses how this framework may enhance coaches’ communication, empathy, and connectedness with their athletes.

**Understanding the Athlete: An Integrative Personality Framework**

The use of a person-based psychology approach can be traced to the founding of personality psychology (e.g., Allport, 1937) and advocates for the study of the whole person. Mallett and Coulter (2016) and Coulter et al. (2016) have recently argued for a return of the person-based psychological approach to understand the whole person within the sport environment. Drawing on the work of McAdams (2013), this approach embodies an integrative system for capturing complex and dynamic aspects of the individual, resulting in an extensive psychological profile. Using this integrative framework in sport may offer a more nuanced view of the individual athlete. It also provides a clear outline for capturing the major domains of
personality, which, in sport, are often limited to a narrow focus on dispositional traits (Coulter et al., 2016).

Similar to Hollander’s (1967) structural model (incorporating layers of psychological core, typical responses, and role-related behaviours), McAdams’ (2013) integrative framework attempts to understand the individual in respect to three differing, yet interconnected layers of understanding: (1) Dispositional traits (the self as a social actor); (2) characteristic adaptations (the self as a motivated agent); and (3) narrative identity (the self as an autobiographical author). This layered perspective emphasizes the different ways that people might understand both themselves and others (McAdams, 2013). It articulates what a person is generally like (layer one), how he or she adapts to the different demands of social life (layer two), and what he or she believes one’s life means as a psychosocially constructed narrative over time (layer three) (Mallett & Coulter, 2016; McAdams & Cox, 2010). These layers provide greater understanding as to how and why an individual behaves the way they do, with respect to traits, motivations, and socially constructed narratives revealing the inner processes of the individual. These layers also present a strong estimate for how the individual will continue to behave in the future.

Contemporary perspectives (e.g., Coulter et al., 2016; Singer, 2005) support this more differentiated view of personality, claiming that it provides a more adequate picture of individual complexity. Outside of sport, McAdams’ framework may help clinical and counselling psychologists determine what aspects of personality to target during psychotherapy (Singer, 2005). It has also been used extensively to study the lives of political leaders (e.g., McAdams, 2010) and people who commit themselves to a life of generativity (e.g., McAdams, 2006). In sport, McAdams’ framework may also be used to plan specific sport and exercise interventions (Coulter et al., 2016).

**Layer one: A trait view**

The first layer in McAdams’ framework depicts the individual as a social actor, which is
represented by his or her dispositional traits. Dispositional traits are the most basic and stable aspect of personality (McAdams & Adler, 2006) and represent an individual’s “adjustment to and engagement of the social world” (McAdams & Pals, 2006, p. 207). Traits provide a recognizable signature, with research showing that personality measures can help to predict behaviour when averaging over a sample of situations (Epstein, 1979; McAdams & Pals, 2006). As coaches get many samples of player behaviours over practices and games, they may be able to identify personality characteristics that have meaningful linkages to what players do on the field. Behaviours may also reflect certain reputations or roles (Mallett & Coulter, 2016; McAdams, 2013) such as a “clutch player” or a “vocal leader.” The former description suggests someone who remains calm during high-pressure situations, while the latter indicates someone who is outgoing and rallies the team.

To measure an individual’s dispositional signature, the Big Five personality factors (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience, and Agreeableness) are often used (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Neuroticism reflects the amount of negative affect an individual experiences. Extraversion relates to positive affect, as well as how outgoing one is. Conscientiousness is one’s overall organization and reliability in completing tasks. Openness to experience refers to the amount to which an individual accepts or rejects new ideas and values, as well as receptivity to emotions and aesthetic experience. Lastly, Agreeableness reflects how one perceives and interacts with others, ranging between high trust and low trust. Recent personality literature has indicated that elite athletes are typically more extraverted, conscientious, agreeable, and less neurotic than lower-achieving athletes and non-athletes, as sport behaviours typically require athletes to exhibit more positive and less negative emotions (Allen, Greenlees, & Jones, 2013; Nia & Besharat, 2010).

**Layer two: A motivational view**

The second layer of personality in McAdams’ (2013) framework is characteristic
adaptations, which depicts the individual as a motivated agent. This layer is more dynamic than layer one and focuses on people’s motivations, social cognitions, and adaptations to environmental and cultural influences (Mallett & Coulter, 2016; McAdams & Pals, 2006). Thus, this level focuses on how people’s individual traits manifest into particular goals and actions, and what they strive to do in different roles and times in their lives (McAdams & Adler, 2006). Characteristic adaptations provide the context that is missed by dispositional traits, helping elucidate what people want and how they go about getting what they want (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Emmons’ (1989) personal strivings (what people are typically trying to do in delineated time periods in their lives) capture the individual as a motivated agent by asking the person to write down what he or she typically strives to do every day. These strivings portray how the individual acts out their dispositional signature, capturing the environmental and motivational cues that lead to a more contextualized understanding of how an individual’s traits come to life (McAdams & Pals, 2006; Singer, 2005). For example, a college student’s striving to “spend time with friends and meet new people” shows how they act within their current environment, which would support an above average to high score in extraversion.

Layer three: A narrative view

McAdams’ third layer of personality, narrative identity, delves deeper than both dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations. This layer looks at the individual as an autobiographical author and suggests there is a core aspect of personality that also involves phenomenological interpretations of what is particularly meaningful in people’s lives (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Expressed through people’s life stories and personal narratives, narrative identity reflects how people come to make sense of their lives in the present by weaving together their recollections of the past with imagined anticipations for the future (McAdams & Pals, 2006). The idea is that, over time, our stories and memories, and how we make meaning from them, both define and convey who we are as individuals. For this reason, it takes time for an individual
to become a self-author, usually taking until adolescence or young adulthood (McAdams & Olson, 2010). One dichotomy in the individual story is the concept of redemption and contamination (McAdams, 2015). A redemption story shifts from evidently negative circumstances to positive ones, with a greater number of redemption stories tied to resiliency (Franz & Stewart, 1994; Randall, Baldwin, McKenzie-Mohr, McKim, & Furlong, 2015). Conversely, contamination stories begin in neutral or positive circumstances, but reach a negative conclusion. Hence, in sport, learning an athlete’s narrative identity may inform a coach about why this individual behaves and commits to sport in particular ways.

**Purpose and Framework**

The purpose of this manuscript is to provide a framework for how coaches can potentially better understand each individual athlete. This study utilises McAdams’ (2013) integrative personality framework to gain a deeper understanding of two collegiate athletes and exemplifies how the three layers of personality (traits, goals, and life stories) provide a holistic understanding of the individual athlete. We ask readers to think critically about coach-athlete relationships and question whether using such a framework would be beneficial to strengthening these relationships. Furthermore, we suggest McAdams’ framework as a tool to improve the profiling of athletes. Recommendations for implementation are included in the discussion.

**Method**

**Participants**

Using a purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2002), two participants were selected from a larger study. Both participants were first year students on a men’s NCAA Division III soccer team at a selective, liberal arts college in the northeast United States with a student body of approximately 2,000 students (40% male and 60% female), of which there are 600 athletes across 25 NCAA sports. The participants were selected due to a match in status (e.g., gender, class year, multisport high school athletes, injury history, graduation from New England
preparatory boarding schools). “Joe” (alias) is a 19-year-old male freshman who identified as African American/Black. He is a former high school soccer and track athlete who viewed his athletic career as a positive experience. “Sean” (alias) is an 18-year-old male freshman who identified as European American/White. Sean is a former high school soccer and lacrosse athlete, and also reported having a positive athletic experience. It may also be important to note that Joe received financial aid for college while Sean did not.

Measures

**Big Five Inventory-44.** The Big Five Inventory-44 (BFI-44; John & Srivastava, 1999) is a 44-item inventory yielding scores for five dimensions of neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, openness to new experience, and conscientiousness. The following are sample items for each subscale, which were assessed on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from (1) disagree strongly to (5) agree strongly: “I see myself as someone who worries a lot” (neuroticism), “I see myself as someone who is helpful and unselfish with others” (agreeableness), “I see myself as someone who is talkative” (extraversion), “I see myself as someone who is curious about many different things” (openness to experience), and “I see myself as someone who does a thorough job” (conscientiousness). John and Srivastava (1999) found support for the internal consistency of the five subscales ($\alpha = 0.75$ to $\alpha = 0.90$) and test-retest reliability ($\alpha = 0.80$, $\alpha = 0.85$, to $\alpha = 0.90$).

**Emmons’ Strivings Assessment.** Characteristic adaptations were assessed via Emmons’ Strivings Assessment (ESA; Emmons, 1989). Strivings are a “middle level” motivational construct that sit between overarching needs/motives and immediate concerns, and asks participants to consider their actions over the course of consistent everyday behaviours (Emmons, 1986). Participants are asked to consider what they are typically motivated to do in their everyday life, by responding to the stem: I typically strive to... To familiarize participants to complete the ESA, some examples were given (e.g., “avoid letting anything upset
me,” “appear intelligent to others”). Participants also rated each striving on a Likert-type scale ranging from (1) low to (10) high on the following dimensions: Happiness when achieving the striving; Unhappiness when failing to achieve the striving; Ambivalence towards the striving; Commitment to the striving; Past attainment for the striving; and Probability of future success for the striving.

Life Story/Most Significant Sport Stories. Participant life stories were assessed via a modified semi-structured interview seeking to identify critical moments that have shaped individuals’ athletic experience. The interview was broadly structured following the tenets of McAdams’ (1995; 2008) life story and defining moments interview, but adapted to yield a more sport-specific narrative. Participants were asked to share their five most significant sport stories, in detail, and then rank their stories in order of significance. Participants were not prompted or given examples to ensure authentic, personal stories.

Procedure

The first author, who was the men’s soccer assistant coach at the time, gained Institutional Review Board approval to conduct research within the team. The two participants were invited to a classroom session to complete the survey, which took place one month after the completion of the soccer season to ensure that research would not impact any player participating in the study. After receiving informed consent, both participants logged into Qualtrics to complete the survey. The beginning of the survey asked the participants to respond to basic demographic questions before being prompted through three successive measures: the BFI-44, the ESA, and McAdams’ Life Stories/Most Significant Sport Stories Assessment. During the ESA, the participants were asked to provide 10 personal strivings and rate these for themes (e.g., happiness, unhappiness). Finally, participants were prompted to identify and rank their five most significant sports stories and include a description and brief title for each. Attaining such stories is useful to understand who the participants are, how and why they compete, and the meaning
and purpose of sport in their lives (see Mallett & Coulter, 2016). Overall, the survey section of the study took approximately 45 minutes to complete. Within one week of completing the Qualtrics survey, each participant completed a follow-up, semi-structured interview, to provide further details to their life stories. Upon arrival, the participants were given a copy of their most significant sport story responses and were asked to retell their stories. They were also asked to reflect on their stories and provide a unifying theme. The interview was audiotaped and took approximately 15-minutes to complete.

**Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

Data analysis took place within the three layers of personality (i.e. dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and narrative identity). For dispositional traits, participants’ BFI-44 responses were calculated relative to a comparison sample of 21-year olds (*n* = 6,076; Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003). Compared to this sample, participants’ mean scores were categorised into a *very low* (greater than two standard deviations below the mean), *low* (between one and two standard deviations below the mean), *average* (within one standard deviation of the mean), *high* (between one and two standard deviations above the mean), or *very high* (greater than two standard deviations above the mean) range for each of the trait dimensions. Scores were then explained using Costa and McCrae’s (1992) personality trait descriptions and personality style correlates.

For characteristic adaptations, a matrix was created to display personal strivings and corresponding ratings for each participant. The first and third author then independently coded participants’ strivings in accordance with prior research (Emmons, 1989; Mallett & Coulter, 2016; Singer, 2005), reaching inter-rater agreement greater than 84%. Strivings were then coded for *approach* and *avoidance* language, reaching inter-rater agreement of 100%. Approach strivings have been associated with positive affect and avoidance strivings with negative affect (Emmons, 1986; Klinger, 1977).
Narrative identity analyses were coded using McAdams’ (2001) narrative identity themes of redemption and contamination, given their connection with the athletic context. Redemption stories were coded when participants experienced negative affect, but reached a positive conclusion (e.g., an athlete overcomes adversity to win). Contamination stories were coded when a neutral or positive affective scene reached a negative conclusion (e.g., an athlete chokes under pressure and loses the game). The first and third author reviewed a series of stories to ensure coding accuracy, reaching agreement on 100% of the stories. After this review, participant stories were independently coded by the first and third author, once again reaching 100% agreement, and were then confirmed by the second author, who is an expert in narrative analysis. The participants’ unifying themes are paraphrased and then major themes from the stories are presented. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant’s anonymity.

Results

Participant 1: “Joe”

Personality traits. As a social actor, Table 1 shows Joe’s trait scores derived from the BFI-44. Joe’s Conscientiousness (C) score was the most extreme feature of his personality. Individuals scoring very low in C tend to be disorganized and lack direction, self-discipline, and dutifulness. Joe’s remaining scores for Neuroticism (N), Agreeableness (A), Openness (O), and Extraversion (E) all fell in the average range. However, on closer inspection, Joe’s N score (N = 4.13) fell just inside the average range, indicating that he is borderline high in terms of how he typically responds emotionally to environmental threats. This implies that, while Joe is somewhat emotionally stable, he may have a tendency to experience strong negative emotions and anxiousness compared to the majority of other people his age. Joe scored well inside the average range for A, O, and E. Individuals scoring in the average range for A tend to fall between the poles of cooperation and competition. An average score for O suggests Joe is somewhat open to new things, but typically does not actively pursue a variety of experiences.
Lastly, individuals scoring within the average range for E tend to be moderately sociable and exhibit positive emotions similar to most other people (Mallett & Coulter, 2016).

Insert Table 1 here.

To gain greater insight into the cardinal traits that distinguish Joe’s personality as a social actor, we can combine the above factor scores (see Table 1) using Costa and McCrae’s (1992) “personality styles.” Joe’s scores in C (very low) and N (average-high) can be used to better understand his Style of Impulse Control. In this case, Joe’s scores border on the Undercontrolled group. This suggests that Joe is someone who generally lacks self-control. He is more likely to act impulsively than the average person, choosing instead to pursue pleasure as opposed to having the self-discipline to structure his time and complete necessary tasks.

**Personal strivings.** Joe identified 10 personal strivings, represented in Table 2, which were examined to learn more about his recurrent goals in day-to-day life. These strivings present Joe as a motivated agent and help provide a second layer of context to his initial trait profile. Themes of (a) Personal Growth and Health \((n = 5)\) (e.g., “push myself physically when I work out,”) (b) Achievement \((n = 2)\) (e.g., “be the best student I can be”), (c) Independence \((n = 2)\) (e.g., “not let others affect my mood”), and (d) Power \((n = 1)\) (e.g., “make my parents proud”) emerged. Joe’s responses were also coded for approach and avoidance language to understand sources of positive and negative affect. Eight of ten personal strivings were coded as approach (e.g., “be the best student I can be”), while only two were coded as avoidance (e.g., “not let others affect my mood”).

Insert Table 2 here.

Joe’s five Personal Growth and Health strivings represented half of his strivings. His strivings to “push myself physically when I work out” and “be as organized as possible” suggest that he wants to improve himself. Similarly, Joe’s Achievement striving to “set daily goals and meet them,” shows a way in which he measures goal achievement. “Not care about what other
people think of me” and “not let others affect my mood” were categorized as Independent because they focus on not letting others influence him. Both Independent strivings used *avoidance* language and were coded accordingly. The fact that these two strivings were framed in terms of avoidance highlights that this is a concern for Joe – that he may see himself as susceptible to caring too much about others’ opinions. Finally, “make my parents proud” was coded as a Power striving because it relates to positively influencing his parents’ impression of himself. Here, again, one can see Joe’s strong awareness and concern for how others may perceive him.

Joe provided some ratings that are worth noting. First, Joe’s “past attainment” ratings are relatively low, while his anticipated “probability of future success” ratings are high. This finding suggests that Joe is confident in his ability to achieve his strivings moving forward, despite low success rates in the past. Second, Joe rated his avoidant strivings as low for “happiness when achieving” and high for “unhappiness when failing to achieve.” This finding suggests that he is especially motivated to avoid the experience of failure rather than by the possibilities that may come with achieving success. Third, two strivings—“do the ‘right’ thing in any situation” and “tell the truth as much as possible”—were rated low in past attainment, revealing that Joe may do things that he perceives to be “wrong” such as not telling the truth. These lower past attainment ratings for strivings regarding his personal conduct suggest his own self-doubts about his internal moral compass. Combined with concerns about others’ perceptions of him, this striving profile points to some fragility in his self-concept, which links to his very low score on conscientiousness.

Combining Joe’s personal striving (*motivated agent*) and dispositional trait (*social actor*) data provides a more complete understanding of his personality. For example, his strivings to stay organized and meet daily goals suggest that he is aware of his deficiencies in conscientiousness. Secondly, Joe’s strivings suggest he is motivated to avoid failure, which may
correspond to his high-average N score. Beyond traits and characteristic adaptations lies a third layer of personality, narrative identity, which can deepen our understanding of Joe as a unique individual.

**Narrative identity.** Joe’s narrative identity was revealed through his five most significant sport stories. These stories represent Joe as an autobiographical author and provide greater context for his athletic experiences and how he forms his athletic identity. Joe’s stories, which are presented in chronological order, were all coded as redemptive due to reaching positive conclusions. His redemptive stories suggest that he learns from times of struggle and tries to make the most out of any situation. He provided his own titles for his stories, which are followed by his ranking (1= most significant, 5= least significant).

**The beginning of a great story (5).** Joe began by discussing how soccer became his main sport focus as a seven-year-old. In particular, he recalled the time a spectator said that he had college potential as a soccer player and, from that moment onward, it became “the thing” in his life. He also shared, what he described as, an “awesome moment” in his early sporting life-story. Specifically, playing for an under-11s team as an eight-year old, he scored two goals against the best team in the league finals to help win the match and the league title.

**Sport psychology: Chapter 1 (4).** After winning the league, Joe said his club team travelled from “state to state winning tournaments.” Joe said it was a time where his dad tried to push him more than he would have liked, but, overall, he was fine and “could handle the pressure.” When traveling to one particular tournament, Joe recalled his dad telling him that he had to leave his club team to go to an Olympic Development Program (ODP) try-out. Joe felt bad for having to leave his team behind and described playing nervously during the beginning of the try-out. Joe remembers his dad asking him what was wrong during a water break and telling him that he felt bad for leaving his team. His dad reassured him and told him to put it out of his mind and “just play.” Joe played well in the remainder of the try-out, made the ODP team, and
then returned to his team who had won the tournament. Joe described this as “a really good moment.”

**Setbacks (2).** Up until this point in his athletic narrative, Joe described that he had “never faced any adversity when it came to soccer.” However, after his family moved to a different state, Joe tried-out for the best team in the area. He did not make the team and he recalled how devastated he felt when he learned he did not make the team. Although describing the event and period as “a really bad time,” he used it to frame positive stories later on (e.g., meeting a new coach, finding a new team).

“**Phil**” (3). “Phil,” a 40-year old British soccer enthusiast, became Joe’s new coach. Joe remembers him as being very passionate about the game and, in particular, how much he would yell at the team despite the players being 14-years old. Joe described the yelling as not coming across in a mean way, but was just something you had to listen to and respect as a player. Despite the constant yelling, Joe liked Phil and said that he made him “resilient.” In his two years with Phil, Joe said, he got the confidence he needed to grow and become his “fuller self.”

**Assurance I needed (1).** After playing for Phil, Joe played in the Academy with players who had youth national team experience. He recalled struggling to play for coach “Bob” and within his system, but played “the best soccer ever” when away from the team during their summer break. Unfortunately, his high levels of confidence did not last long once back with the team. The team then went to play in England where Joe described scoring a goal that reinvigorated him to feel like he could play at a high level. He remembered getting a compliment from Bob “for the first time ever” and said it was “awesome.” Joe said this experience made him believe that his soccer future could go wherever he wanted to take it.

**Unifying theme.** Joe identified his ability to thrive on adversity as the main unifying theme connecting his sports stories. One theme that clearly emerged, but was not consciously highlighted by Joe, is his strong awareness of older men’s perceptions of him. His stories weave
together archetypal male characters – father and coach – that are pushing him forward to succeed and whose approval he is seeking to obtain. The repeated shifts in his self-assessment and mood (as he falters or triumphs) parallel their presence and influence in his sports stories.

**Participant 2: “Sean”**

**Personality traits.** Sean’s personality traits on the BFI-44 are shown in Table 1. Sean’s most distinctive trait score is C. Individuals scoring high in C tend to be organized, self-disciplined, and task oriented. Sean “agrees strongly” that he does a thorough job, is a reliable worker, perseveres until a task is finished, does things efficiently, and follows through with plans. As such, Sean is more likely to structure his time well, stay organized, and be more motivated to succeed than the average college student.

Sean also fell within the high range for A. High scorers tend to be more trusting and are typically more cooperative than competitive. A high A score indicates a preference to avoid conflict with others. Thus, Sean may find himself agreeing with others to avoid confrontation even when, deep down, he actually disagrees with their point of view.

Sean scored in the low range for E, indicating that he tends to be quiet, reserved, and lacks an assertive personality. His highest item responses for E were “agree a little” to “is full of energy” and “generates a lot of enthusiasm.” Sean also scored in the low range for O. Low scorers are not as open-minded to new experiences as the average person and, typically, prefer to stick to what they know rather than seek out new experiences.

Sean’s N score fell into the average range. Sean reported that he is emotionally stable, not easily upset, and not depressed or moody. However, other N items revealed that he worries a lot, does not handle stress well, and does not remain calm in tense situations. The juxtaposition of these items suggests that he may be stable within environments he knows, but that doing something new, or having to adapt, may push him out of his comfort zone.

Using Costa and McCrae’s (1992) research on “personality styles,” we can see how
Sean’s scores in C (high), A (high), E (low), and O (low) interact and better represent Sean as a social actor. First, his Style of Activity (E and C) score identified him in the *Plodder* category. Plodders tend to stick to their business and avoid interacting with others. Second, Sean’s Style of Learning (O and C) score revealed that he is a *By-the-Booker*. This learning style is associated with following directions closely – sticking to the material, rather than thinking critically or exploring further possibilities. Third, his Style of Character (A and C) showed that he is an *Effective Altruist*. Individuals in this group tend to be more accepting of others and follow through in helping others. In sum, Sean’s Big Five results reveal a passive individual that tends to stick to himself, follow the rules, and accept others.

**Personal Strivings.** Sean’s nine personal strivings loaded into three main themes of (a) Affiliation \((n = 3)\) (e.g., “not to be alone”), (b) Personal Growth & Health \((n = 3)\) (e.g., “to stay fit and lose weight”), and (c) Self-Presentation \((n = 2)\) (e.g., “to appear confident”). One striving was coded for Achievement (“get good grades”). Sean’s strivings revealed that seven of his nine strivings used *approach* language, which suggest he is more motivated by the potentials and possibilities in his life, than avoiding any fears attached to experiencing failure. 

*Insert Table 3 here.*

Sean’s three affiliation strivings support his high agreeableness trait score. “Avoid taking comments personally,” “stay away from confrontation,” and “be kind to others,” show his preference to cooperate and avoid confrontation. “Avoid taking comments personally” and “stay away from confrontation” were also coded as *avoidance* strivings, suggesting that Sean may personalize criticism and, thus, attempts to avoid disagreement or conflicting arguments. For personal growth and health \((n = 3)\), Sean shows he is focused on staying fit, playing soccer, and focusing on tasks until completion. Sean wrote two Self-Presentation strivings (i.e., “appear intelligent to others” and “appear athletic”), suggesting that he is concerned with how others perceive him. Finally, Sean provided one achievement striving of, “get good grades.” In sum,
Sean’s strivings reveal that he wants to avoid conflict, appear smart and athletic, and do well in school and soccer.

Looking at Sean’s strivings matrix, two notable aspects of his ratings emerge. First, eight of nine strivings elicit high responses (7-10) in each of the categories of happiness, unhappiness, commitment, past attainment, and probability of future success (see Table 3). Only striving five, “appear intelligent to others,” did not earn a high response. Second, Sean’s ratings for “probability of future success” and “past attainment” were identical (e.g. past attainment = 8, probability of future success = 8) for each of his nine strivings. These two findings suggest Sean deeply cares about his strivings (other than “appear intelligent to others”) and that he reflects on his past attainment to estimate his probability of future success.

**Narrative Identity.** Of Sean’s five stories, four were coded as redemptive in theme, suggesting that his most significant sport memories were times in which he overcame some form of adversity. However, his one contamination story, “last high school game,” was ranked as his second most significant story. Similar to Joe’s results, stories are titled, ranked (1= most significant, 5= least significant), and presented in chronological order.

**The undefeated season (5).** Sean attended a middle school that lacked talented athletes. He decided to play soccer to be with his friends and they went undefeated going into their final game against the next best team in the region. Sean’s team was losing 4-5 when, in the final minutes of the game, they were awarded a penalty kick. Sean recalled, “I ended up having to take the PK [penalty kick],” suggesting that he may not have wanted to. He scored to tie the game and remembers celebrating their undefeated season with all of his friends.

**High school (1).** Sean’s second story begins during his first year of high school. He decided to play soccer for fun, but following his first season, the varsity coach asked him to train with the varsity team during the winter. Sean recalled showing up to the first practice — seeing “how good they were, how talented everybody was, and I just knew I wanted to be like them.”
changed how he thought about soccer forever. Without that opportunity, Sean said he probably would never have played college soccer.

_The injury (3)._ During that same freshman year of high school, Sean’s friend, Gabe, convinced him to play lacrosse. However, Gabe had a lengthy injury history so he joined the team as a practice player and did not play in any games. During a practice, Sean ended up hitting Gabe and broke his arm. “I just felt terrible about it and it ended up, like, making a ridge between us.” Sean avoided Gabe because he thought Gabe hated him. At the same time, Gabe thought Sean hated him because he was avoiding him. After a few months, Sean and Gabe talked over what happened and it made them closer. Sean and Gabe remain close to this day.

_Bench player (4)._ This story also took place during Sean’s freshman year on the lacrosse team. Until then, Sean had always been one of the better players due to “being from a small town” and not having many athletic kids to compete against. However, once at high school, and with greater competition, Sean was benched. “It was the first time… I ever sat the bench… and the feeling it gave me, I just, I just hated it.” He recalled feeling “terrible about myself” when his family would come to watch him play and he was on the bench. “That feeling has driven me to practice more and be able to play on every team.”

_Last high school game (2)._ Sean’s soccer team was ranked number one going into high school playoffs as a senior. His team won the first few rounds but ended the final game in a tie. The tie led to a penalty kick shootout and Sean’s captain, George, who “always seemed, like, so calm, cool, and collected and so strong” missed the final PK. Sean’s team lost the game and George fell to the ground and started crying. That memory stuck with Sean because “just seeing him, seeing what sports can do to people” showed him “the power it [i.e., sport] has on your emotions.”

_Unifying theme._ Sean’s motif was that sports are powerful and can significantly impact people’s emotions and motivations. Many of Sean’s stories centre on the theme of being
influenced by peers (e.g. playing lacrosse for Gabe, wanting to be like the varsity soccer players). In contrast to Joe, there are virtually no mentions of coaches or parental figures in his narratives; comparison to and interaction with peers are the focus of his memories. Furthermore, language such as “having to take the PK,” and “seeing what sports can do to people,” suggest that he remains passive in sport contexts and follows his peers.

**Discussion**

The word “personality” is often used in sport to refer to a behaviour or action that an athlete or coach has displayed. To this point, personality in sport is almost invariably equated with personality traits (see Allen et al., 2013; Roberts & Woodman, 2015) as they are important for distinguishing how athletes generally compare to one another on individual difference dimensions, such as the Big Five (as reported here) or other traits, like optimism, perfectionism, hardiness, resilience, and anxiety (e.g., see Mosley & Laborde, 2016). However, it is rare for coaches and sport institutions to profile their athletes beyond the broad and generalized descriptors of dispositional traits, leaving out important contextual information that can be used to greater understand athletes as whole persons. The current study addressed this contextual information by piloting McAdams’ (2013) framework, similar to a recent study conducted by Mallett and Coulter (2016). However, this study differed in that it focused on two collegiate athletes.

The personality profiles of Joe and Sean reveal rich, yet different, information. Although Joe’s traits may hinder his ability to stay organized and do well in school and on the field, we also now understand a deeper conflict between relishing praise from others (e.g., his father, coaches) and remaining independent. Perhaps this inner conflict is a reason why Joe plays well as an underdog (e.g., “The Beginning of A Great Story”) but poorly when there are expectations (e.g., “Sport Psychology: Chapter 1”, “Setbacks”, “Assurance I Needed”). These stories revealed that Joe sometimes lacks a consistency in temper that may limit his ability to master his
role on more skilled teams. Other themes of extrinsic motivation, scapegoating, and self-doubt also showed themselves in parts of Joe’s stories. Lastly, Joe’s redemptive sports stories and theme of liking adversity showed that, while he may struggle at times, his positive demeanour and ability to make meaning of negative situations might allow him to continue developing through such adversity. This information is important as it provides greater context for a coach to use in helping Joe develop as both a player and as a person. The coach might schedule weekly meetings with Joe (or direct him to student services) to check in on him and make sure he is staying organized and doing well with his schoolwork. The coach would also understand that, although Joe likes adversity, he or she must balance giving Joe criticism and praise to challenge him and keep him feeling valued as a player.

Sean’s personality profile differed from Joe’s, yet revealed equally meaningful information. Sean’s traits reflected an individual who is shy, well organized, does things by the book, and generally trusts those around him. Layer two strivings strengthen his layer one data. In particular, they clarify that his shyness and general trust in others may be due to his desire to avoid confrontation. Also, despite being shy, Sean has achieved a high level of success in his strivings and believes he will continue to do so into the future. Together, this finding suggests a solid sense of self-efficacy built on past success. Lastly, layer three shows that many of Sean’s sports stories focus on others (e.g., “Last High School Game”, “High School”, “Undefeated Season”, “The Injury”), reflecting a theme of extrinsic motivators present in his athletic development. Furthermore, Sean’s unifying message that sports have the power to impact individual emotions and motivations suggests that athletes do not have full control of the game and are victim to positive and negative outcomes in sport. Taken collectively, Sean’s profile indicates that he may limit stimulation by over controlling his environment and not taking chances. This restraint and inclination toward passivity may limit his ability to assert himself. If a coach were to know this information about Sean, he or she may attempt to empower him by
creating a training environment where it is more permissible to take chances and fail. The coach would also be aware that Sean might not respond well to more direct or autocratic coaching methods, due to his desire to avoid confrontation. In contrast, he is likely to do best when he experiences peer acceptance and encouragement. Finally, although lack of control and risk seem to scare Sean, we may safely assume that he will continue on successfully as long as he stays organized, avoids confrontation, and generally plays it safe.

**Practical Implications**

As has been shown with Joe and Sean, McAdams’ (2013) framework provides an overarching structure that provides greater opportunities to understand an athlete more fully. In particular, it provides additional information than could have been provided through traits (layer one) alone. The three layers of information also allow the coach to potentially build better relationships with each athlete and understand what they may need to develop (i.e., when to provide support, when to hold them accountable, how and when to motivate them). From the athletes’ perspective, going through such a learning process, in which they talk about traits, strivings, and life stories, may initiate more open communication with one’s coach. For example, they may feel as though the coach cares about them as a person as well as an athlete, which is important to fostering the coach-athlete relationship (Becker, 2009; Davis & Jowett, 2014; Philippe & Seiler, 2006). Athletes may also use their profile to increase self-awareness, allowing for clarity of self as to who they are as a person and athlete. These reflections may help an athlete better understand why it is they play sport, how their personal strivings affect them, or what previous experiences shape their current athletic identity. A better understanding of self, and communicating this with the coach, may enhance mutual agreement and goal acceptance moving forward. These outcomes may help the player become more comfortable and willing to approach the coach, for instance, as they experience the on-going challenges and joys associated with being a student-athlete.
The current study presents opportunities to reflect on the practicalities of using McAdams’ framework as a basis to profile people in sport. First, this profiling procedure was a relatively time intensive process. For this reason, a coach might not be able to realistically prepare, disseminate, collect, and analyse results. However, teams that have the advantage of working with a sport psychologist may be able to implement this framework in a classroom session during the offseason or preseason. This would allow time for results to be collected, analysed, and discussed with the players on the team. Some positives to this timing include staying connected with each individual athlete during the offseason, while using this profiling scheme might allow players and coaches to reap the aforementioned benefits of building coach-player relationships (Becker, 2009; Jowett, 2003; Philippe & Seiler, 2006). After completing the multilevel process with an entire team, subsequent years may include having new first-year players complete the assessment so as to build these relationships for the upcoming years. High performance organisations and professional sport clubs may, similarly, use this strategy, either by profiling or screening new players via McAdams’ framework. Players who have been profiled using McAdams’ framework and are returning to the team, on the other hand, may subsequently focus on the second (motivated agent) and third (autobiographical author) layers of personality, as they may have new goals or stories from the past year. These two layers may provide situation-specific (e.g., going into season) and culturally developed meanings. Lastly, it is recommended for the coach to learn more about themselves and their personality via McAdams’ framework. In doing so, they might also consider sharing some of these insights (e.g., traits, strivings, or critical stories as a coach and/or athlete) with their own athletes, which may contribute further to developing a more meaningful coach-athlete relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation that should be noted with respect to the research is the role of the first author. The first author was an assistant coach and graduate student during the time in which
this study was conducted, and although IRB approval was granted and APA ethical guidelines were followed, the participants may have self-reported scores to impress the coach. However, research collected appeared to be sincere, with participants openly reporting weaknesses and shortcomings within the data. A larger concern is that personality measures used in this study may not necessarily capture other significant factors that might account for individual variation in player performance and development (i.e., relationships, family health, socioeconomic status, fitting in with the team culture). However, McAdams’ framework does help to provide a comprehensive understanding of the athlete’s personality and may help to initiate further conversations on these topics.

The present study and adopted framework should encourage further research on coaches’ understanding of their players and their consequent efforts to interact with the differing personalities present on their teams. In particular, we see value in the quest to explore the potential of McAdams’ framework to help improve coach-athlete relationships at the performance sport level. It may be advantageous to conduct a study to see if a profiling scheme designed around McAdams’ framework would increase coach-athlete relationships as per Jowett’s (2003) constructs of closeness, co-orientation, and complementarity. Second, given the multidimensional role of the coach, it is worth conducting a study to see if implementing this framework to an entire team is an effective use of time. Third, as coaching styles differ, it is likely that a coach could use the data in any number of ways (e.g., team selection, player development, behaviour change in the athlete) beyond the relational component. A study should be conducted to see how coaches use the data yielded from McAdams’ framework. Lastly, a valuable goal would be to develop a succinct, electronic tool that would allow for preliminary summaries of each of McAdams’ three layers in order to reduce the time involved in initial data collection and analysis.

**Conclusion**
The current study advocated for the use of McAdams’ framework as a way for coaches to better understand their athletes as (i) the type of people they are (i.e., their traits compared to the majority of others), (ii) what they want (i.e., their motivational agenda), and (iii) the unique stories and memories that provide an insight into who they are in sport (i.e., their athletic identity). As the case studies of Joe and Sean revealed, McAdams’ framework provides a wealth of knowledge beyond the personality trait data that we are used to seeing in sport. The added depth of information may help a coach better understand each individual athlete and develop more positive coach-athlete relationships, hence improving team cohesion and performance. Although implementation does require resources (e.g., time and knowledge and/or access to a sport psychologist), McAdams’ framework is recommended within the elite sport setting. Further research using McAdams’ framework may also reveal how to best utilise a whole person approach to personality profiling in sport.
References


V. Jones (Eds.), *Psychology of sport coaching. Sport and exercise psychology division* (pp. 14–26). Leicester: The British Psychological Society.


Table 1

*Trait Profiles of Joe and Sean (BFI-44)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Joe’s Scores</th>
<th>Sean’s Scores</th>
<th>Comparison Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(C) Conscientiousness</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>Very Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N) Neuroticism</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A) Agreeableness</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(O) Openness</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E) Extraversion</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Total score ranges: C (9-45), N (8-40), A (9-45), O (10-50), E (8-40) M scores are between 1-5. 1 = “Disagree Strongly” and 5 = “Agree Strongly”*
Table 2

Joe’s Personal Striving Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Participant Behaviours</th>
<th>Happiness when achieving this striving?</th>
<th>Unhappiness when failing to achieve this striving?</th>
<th>Ambivalence towards this striving?</th>
<th>Commitment to this striving?</th>
<th>Past attainment for this striving?</th>
<th>Probability of future success?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Be the best student I can be</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Push myself physically when I work out</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Not care about what other people think of me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Set daily goals and meet them</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Not let others affect my mood</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Be as optimistic / positive as possible</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Make my parents proud</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do the “right” thing in any situation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Be as organized as possible</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Tell the truth as much as possible</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. 1= low, 10= high

* denotes the rating was left blank
Table 3

*Sean’s Personal Striving Matrix*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Participant Behaviours</th>
<th>Happiness when achieving this striving?</th>
<th>Unhappiness when failing to achieve this striving?</th>
<th>Ambivalence towards this striving?</th>
<th>Commitment to this striving?</th>
<th>Past attainment for this striving?</th>
<th>Probability of future success?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Get good grades</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Avoid taking comments personally</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Stay away from confrontation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Be kind to others</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Appear intelligent to others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Keep myself in good physical condition</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Appear athletic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Play soccer everyday</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Stay focused on a task until it is finished</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. 1= low, 10= high*