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Relationship maintenance strategies in the coach-athlete relationship: The development of the COMPASS model

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Abstract

The investigation of relationship maintenance strategies has received considerable attention in various types of dyads including romantic, marital, and familial relationships. No research, however, has yet investigated the use of maintenance strategies in the coach-athlete partnership. Thus, this study aimed to investigate coaches' and athletes' perceptions of the strategies they use to maintain relationship quality. Twelve one-to-one interviews with coaches (4 males and 2 females) and athletes (2 males and 4 females) were conducted. The interviews were structured based on the factors within Jowett's (2007) 3+1C conceptualization of the coach-athlete relationship (i.e., closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation). Deductive and inductive content analysis revealed seven main categories: Conflict management, openness, motivation, Positivity, advice, support, and social networks. The COMPASS model was developed based on this analysis and was offered as a theoretical framework for understanding how coaches and athletes might maintain the quality of their relationships.

Keywords: coach-athlete relationship, relationship maintenance strategies

Relationship Maintenance Strategies in the Coach-Athlete Relationship: The Development of the COMPASS Model

Significant strides have been made in our understanding of the nature and role of interpersonal relationships in sport over the past decade. Research in this domain has considered athlete-athlete, parent-athlete, and coach-athlete partnerships (e.g., Jowett & Chaundy, 2004; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). Recently, Jowett and Wylleman (2006), in considering research on the coach-athlete relationship, suggested that "…we have started crossing the chasm and started approaching an exciting research territory that needs exploration with careful navigation" (p. 123). Research progress in this field employs numerous theoretical and methodological approaches (see e.g., Chelladurai & Riemer, 1998; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007 for overviews). Research indicated that relationship quality was positively associated with outcomes such as self-concept (Jowett, in press), satisfaction (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004), passion for one's sport (Lafreniere, Jowett, Vallerand, Donahue, & Lorimer, 2008), and team cohesion (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004). Nonetheless, no research has focused on *how* coaches and athletes maintain the quality of their athletic relationships.

Commenting on all dyads, Canary and Stafford (1994) stated that "most people desire long-term, stable, and satisfying relationships" (p. 4). Moreover, it has been argued that unless people use effective maintenance strategies, their relationships will weaken and ultimately end (Canary & Stafford, 1994). A great deal of time must be invested in personal relationships to maintain them (Duck, 1986). In the context of sport, coaches and athletes establish and maintain their athletic relationships motivated by such wide ranging goals as improving performance, achieving success, maintaining fitness, or simply enjoying participation. Clearly such partnerships occur in a range of situations (e.g., different

competitive levels and types of sport) and are subject to organizational constraints (e.g., organizational culture, goals, funding pressures). Thus, maintenance of the coach-athlete relationship is not simple and often necessitates conscious effort from both parties.

The coach-athlete relationship has been defined as "…the situation in which coaches' and athletes' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are mutually and causally inter-connected" (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004, p. 245). This definition highlights the bi-directional nature of such relationships in that the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of the coach are both affected by, and also affect, those of the athlete and vice versa. This definition also supports the belief that relationship quality is multi-dimensional and hence one needs to consider the affective (emotions), cognitive (thoughts), and behavioral interpersonal aspects of relationships (e.g., Kelley et al., 1983).

Jowett (2005, 2007) developed the 3+1Cs conceptualization of the coach-athlete relationship based on a series of qualitative studies (e.g., Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). This conceptualization refers to four constructs: closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation. This model argues that the quality of the relationship between a coach and an athlete is formed through these four key constructs. Closeness was defined as the affective meanings that the coach and athlete assign to their relationship (e.g., respect, trust, liking). The cognitive aspect, operationalized as commitment, relates to the members' intentions to maintain the relationship now and in the future. The behavioral aspect, operationalized as complementarity, refers to the relationship members' co-operative and corresponding behaviors of affiliation (e.g., being responsive and friendly). Finally, the "+1" element of this conceptualization was co-orientation, falling under the cognitive construct because it is perceptual in nature (cf. Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966). It was labeled the "+1" element because it runs through each of the other affective, cognitive, and

behavioral elements. Co-orientation concerns the degree to which an athlete and coach are able to accurately infer how his/her coach/athlete is feeling, thinking, and behaving.

This body of research shed light on different factors that both affect, and are affected by, the coach-athlete relationship. It also developed our understanding of the nature and content of this important dyadic relationship within the realm of sport development. Nevertheless, there remains a great scope for research in this field, as displayed by Jowett and Poczwardowski's (2007) research model. This model calls for research regarding the role played by interpersonal communication, because communication is viewed as a process from which coaches and athletes can either become close (united) or distant (divided). Thus, the argument is that relationship maintenance strategies are embedded within the interpersonal communication "layer" of Jowett and Poczwardowski's (2007) research model.

Dindia and Canary (1993) described relationship maintenance as the strategies used to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition. Some examples of the use of relationship maintenance may include discussing an area of disagreement and coming to a joint decision of how it can be resolved (i.e., conflict management) or going out together for the evening (i.e., socializing). Wiegel and Ballard-Reisch (1999) suggested that maintenance strategies are the primary method via which people within close relationships maintain relationship quality. The initial studies of relationship maintenance centered on dating or married couples (e.g., Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991). More recently the principles and concepts of relationship maintenance have been applied to parent-child relationships (e.g., Punyanunt-Carter, 2006) and friendships (Bippus, & Rollin, 2003). As yet, however, no research has addressed this topic with reference to the coach-athlete relationship.

In a seminal paper within the relationship maintenance literature, Stafford and Canary (1991) identified, based on factor analysis, five primary relationship maintenance strategies that were used by dating or engaged couples: positivity, openness, assurance, social networks,

and shared tasks. Positivity concerned acting cheerful and upbeat when around one's partner. Openness related to the direct discussion of the relationship and disclosing what one wants from it. Assurance referred to the sending of messages that imply one's commitment to the relationship. Social networks involved spending time together and interacting with mutual friends. Finally, shared tasks related to the partners performing assigned chores around the house. Canary and Zelley (2000) added two additional relationship maintenance categories: Conflict management (i.e., co-operating when discussing disagreements) and advice (i.e., giving one's opinions regarding the partner's problems).

Canary and Stafford (1992) suggested that, in general, the use of maintenance strategies also "affects the nature of the relationship" (p. 9). Over the years, research studies found positive associations with relationship properties such as liking (Canary & Stafford, 1992), trust (Stafford, Dainton, & Hass, 2000), affinity seeking (Bell, Daly, & Gonzalez, 1987), control mutuality (Canary & Stafford, 1992), love (Stafford, et al. 2000), and commitment (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford et al., 2000). Research also has indicated that maintenance strategies need to be continually performed because their absence could lead to a rapid decline in the quality of a relationship (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002).

Overall, it was believed that these types of relationship maintenance acts were used to ensure the continuation of valued relationships through three distinct routes (a) the prevention of their decline, (b) their further enhancement, and/or (c) their repair and re-establishment (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Canary and Stafford (1994) argued that the use of these strategies could lead to a number of positive relationship-related outcomes including intimacy, commitment, and satisfaction.

Although no sport psychology research has directly considered relationship maintenance within the coach-athlete relationship, some research appeared to address issues related to maintenance strategies. For example, Gould, Lauer, Collins, and Chung (2007)

interviewed ten American football coaches who all received awards for their abilities to facilitate their athletes' personal development. In the interviews, these coaches emphasized the importance of communication (i.e., having open lines of communication with their athletes, possessing clear expectations, and holding their players accountable). These coaches also avoided using punishment or criticisms that were directed towards their players' characters or personalities, and showed that they cared, trusted, and respected their players as people. These enacted communicative acts paralleled the relationship maintenance strategies labeled as positivity, openness, and assurance (cf. Stafford & Canary, 1991). Moreover, research focusing on coaches' behaviors consistently has illustrated that supportive and encouraging coaches were likely to have a positive influence on their athletes' development (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2006). This supporting coaching was particularly effective when their athletes were less confident about themselves (Smith & Smoll, 1990). Thus, the use of maintenance strategies in sport has been indirectly associated with positive outcomes.

Although this limited body of research indirectly addressed some of the processes leading to satisfying coach-athlete interactions, it did not directly examine relationship maintenance strategies. Thus, the aim of this study was to assess coaches' and athletes' perceptions of the strategies that might be used to maintain the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Even though it was acknowledged that all relationships are unique, the present research aimed to identify strategies that were salient across different relationships.

The need for the present study could be justified on three fronts. First, because the quality of a coach-athlete relationship has been associated with a range of positive outcomes, there is a demand to understand how relationship quality could be optimized. Second, relationship maintenance is a significant area of research regarding other relationships but it, as yet, has not been studied within sport. Third, coach-athlete relationships are significantly different to the types of romantic, marital, and familial relationships studied thus far. Clearly,

these alternative dyads are linked biologically or legally. In contrast, a coach and an athlete are generally linked contractually, professionally, or voluntarily with a view to achieving set goals (e.g., fitness, financial rewards, enjoyment). Professional relationships, such as that between a coach and an athlete, are fundamentally different to romantic, marital, and familial relationships and hence, they may be maintained using alternative maintenance strategies. As a result, research was merited to specifically investigate how coach-athlete relationships were maintained.

Method

Participants

A purposive sample ($N = 12$) consisted of 6 coaches and 6 athletes who worked independently and hence, were not existing coach-athlete dyads. Efforts were made to recruit participants who had experienced a range of different coach-athlete relationships. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, we identified them as Athlete 1 - 6 (A1, A2…) and Coach 1 - 6 (C1, C2…) in the results section.

A1 (25 year old female) was an international ice skater who had been training since she was 12 years old. She worked with a single coach throughout her career, but this relationship ended after a period of significant conflict. A1 subsequently continued for a short time without a coach before retiring from the sport. A2 (25 year old male) was an international discus thrower and had been involved with the sport for 13 years. He worked with his first coach between age 13 and 18 years old before changing coaches when he moved away to university. A2 competed at many international youth sport events and currently trained with his coach for 10 hours each week.

A3 (24 year old female) competed as a rower at the national level and had been rowing for 8 years. She had worked with her current coach for 1 year, training for around 10 hours each week. She was also successful at the elite university level. A4 (23 year old

female) had been playing women's football (soccer) for 7 years. She played for an elite university football team. A4 had been working with her coach for 2 years, training for approximately 4 hours each week.

A5 (18 year old female) represented her university at field hockey and had been playing the sport for around 5 years. She trained for 6 hours per week, and had two main coach-athlete relationships with a coach at home and one at university. A6 (22 year old male) was a successful karate player and won medals at the national level. He had worked with his coach for 20 hours each week over the previous year.

C1 (25 year old male) coached at the county level (i.e., regional representative teams). He generally worked with children under 16 years old and had been coaching for 3 years. He trained 3 hours per week. C2 (32 year old male) was a football (soccer) coach with a Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) B license, which is a level of coaching certification. He coached at the national level, both in England and in Spain. He had been coaching for 10 years.

C3 (24 year old male) coached the university archery team. He had been involved in archery for 4 years. He had only been coaching for the past year and mainly worked with beginners for around 2 hours each week. C4 (27 year old female) coached the university 1st football (soccer) team. The team was successful at the university level. She used to play for the team before injury ended her career. She then obtained her UEFA B license, which is a level of coaching certification, before training the team for 10 hours per week over the past 3 years.

C5 (23 year old female) used to compete in trampolining at the national level. She had been coaching at the elite university level for 2 years, training for around 3 hours per week. C6 (57 year old male) coached squash at the county level (i.e., regional representative teams)

for around 30 years. He coached a range of players from the beginner level through to county players.

Instrumentation

One-to-one interviews were conducted to gain in-depth data about the strategies used to maintain the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. An interview schedule was developed based on relevant theory and literature (e.g., Jowett, 2007; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). The original interview schedule was piloted with an athlete and a coach. These interviews were conducted to gain feedback on the content of the interview and to check its approximate length and duration. As a result of the pilot study, minor modifications were made to enhance clarity, coherence, and discourse. The final interview schedule contained a total of 10 open-ended questions and was divided into 3 sections. (The interview schedule is available from the authors.)

The first section outlined the purpose of the study before covering demographic information (e.g., the participant's main sport, length of participation, and competitive level). The second section was the main part of the interview and contained standardized questions that addressed various aspects of interpersonal interactions. Specifically, the focus of this section was on collecting responses related to what the participants considered to be important in a good coach-athlete relationship, as well as how they thought such a relationship was developed and maintained. Participants were also presented with simple definitions of the 3+1Cs and were invited to discuss the time/s when they experienced each of these relationship properties and to consider efforts made to maintain the quality of the relationship (e.g., Think of a time when you were committed to your coach/athlete. What do you feel helped to develop and maintain this?). Prompts and follow-up questions were used as necessary to facilitate and encourage the flow of information. The third and final section of the interview asked participants to make any additional comments, clarify, or expand on any

comments made during the interview (i.e., Are there any other factors which you now think help the development and maintenance of a good coach-athlete relationship, which we have not already discussed?). All interviews were conducted by the first author. All interviews were audio-taped with the permission of the participants and were transcribed verbatim immediately after each interview.

Procedure

Sport clubs within or close to the investigators' university were e-mailed to inform coaches and athletes about the purpose of the study and to invite them to participate. Shortly after the e-mail was sent, a phone call was made to the head coach at the club to identify any potential participants. If there was interest in participating in the study, a convenient time and location was arranged for the interview. In an attempt to maximize the diversity and breadth of the obtained qualitative data, a conscious effort was made to recruit independent coaches and athletes (i.e., no dyads) from a range of sports and competitive levels. Each interview was conducted in a private room with only the interviewer and interviewee present. All participants were informed that the interview was anonymous and confidential and that they were free to end the interview at any time. Prior to any data being collected, approval for the study was obtained from the university's ethical advisory committee. Interviewees were e-mailed a copy of their transcribed interviews so they could check and verify the accuracy of the transcription.

Data Analysis

The use of content analysis after an interview is the most common qualitative approach within sport psychology research (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993). Content analysis is a process by which large amounts of qualitative data are organized through coding the information into categories that concern similar themes. It was deemed to be the most appropriate approach in the present research because it would allow the identification of

salient themes across participants' responses. It also helped to highlight potential strategies that might be relevant to all coach-athlete relationships. Both deductive and inductive forms of content analysis were employed in this study.

The analytical process commenced by reading all 143 single-spaced pages of the transcribed data to increase our understanding of the information that was obtained from the participants. Subsequently, a review panel (comprised of the authors and an independent researcher) analyzed the data on the basis that a raw data unit represented a "quote" (i.e., a complete sentence/s that referred to a distinct strategy and made sense as a stand alone unit). A total of 401 meaning units were highlighted. In the first stage of the analysis, quotes were categorized deductively into one of the seven maintenance strategies highlighted within the literature review: conflict management, openness, advice, positivity, assurance, shared tasks, and social networks. Any relevant quotes that did not represent these categories, were placed in an 'other' category.

In the second stage, the quotes within the 'other' category were then inductively analyzed to underline new potential maintenance strategies specific to the coach-athlete relationship. Finally, the quotes within the existing and new categories were reviewed to identify lower and higher order themes.

The review panel then independently reviewed the initial categorizations to confirm that all of the quotes were correctly classified. The panel went through each quote to confirm the agreement on the classification. In particular, quotes were reviewed in terms of whether they better reflected the newly created motivation category. Thus, some of the quotes were moved from the positivity category to the motivation category at this stage. All areas of discrepancy were resolved by dialogue and re-assignment.

As a final check, once the review panel was satisfied with all the classifications, the categories and sub-categories were given to an independent psychology researcher who was

asked to assign each sub-category (lower order theme, specific) to the most appropriate category (higher order theme, general). Then, the same researcher categorized the quotes into the most appropriate lower order theme. The responses supplied were 90% in agreement with the authors' categorizations, demonstrating some evidence of inter-rater reliability.

Results and Discussion

Seven higher order themes emerged from the data: Conflict management, openness, motivation, positivity, advice, support, and social networks. These seven dimensions contained 21 sub-categories. The results are presented using a frequency table and illustrative quotes as recommended by Culver, Gilbert, and Trudel (2003). Overall, each of the dimensions was referenced by the majority of the participants. The largest discrepancies between the coaches and the athletes were found regarding conflict management (which was mentioned by all coaches, but only by four of the athletes). Interestingly, both athletes who did not mention conflict management were from team sports (i.e., field hockey and rowing). Similarly, support was discussed by all athletes, but only by four of the coaches). Both coaches who did not mention support were involved at the county level indicating that competitive level might influence the use of maintenance strategies.

Table 1 summarizes the categorization of raw data points into the various dimensions and themes. Results were broken down to show the distribution of the coaches' responses, the athletes' responses, and the sample as a whole. This information is presented to give an overview of the data and to outline the distribution of the quotes, rather than to provide a basis for any comparative or statistical analysis.

Conflict Management

The first dimension that emerged from the data concerned conflict management, which was cited by 10 of the participants (6 coaches and 4 athletes) with 9.5% of the raw data points being categorized in this dimension (6.5% coaches and 3% athletes). Conflict

management reflected expectations, consequences of unmet expectations, and cooperation in the discussion of conflict. It contained the themes of proactive strategies (e.g., taking steps to clarify expectations and avoid conflict) and reactive strategies (e.g., co-operating during the discussion of disagreements). The following quote is an example of proactive conflict management. It shows how this particular athlete continually discussed expectations with his coach, helping him to avoid the development of any conflicts that could arise from expectations not being met:

> You can discuss at the beginning of the relationship what you both expect from one another and have an understanding, a consensus, between the two from the start of the relationship, but I think that it is important during the relationship as years go on to reassess that (A2: Male international track and field athlete).

This dimension was similar to that highlighted within close relationships (Canary & Zelley, 2000; Stafford et al., 2000). Its conceptualization, however, has been expanded to include not only co-operative acts during disagreements, but also pre-emptive strategies such as clarifying the expectations and the consequences when these are not met (e.g., fines for being consistently late for training). The inclusion of these pre-emptive strategies might highlight the distinctive elements of the coach-athlete relationship relative to other dyads. Previous research emphasized the importance of discussing expectations (e.g., Gould et al., 2007). It might be that sporting dyads are used to setting goals and planning for future events and hence, these pre-emptive strategies play a particularly significant role within the sporting arena.

Openness

Openness was mentioned by all 12 participants and 12% of the raw data units were categorized within this dimension (5% coaches and 7% athletes). Openness related to the

disclosure of one's feelings. It contained three themes: Non-sport communication (e.g., discussing issues that are not directly related to training or competition), talk about anything (e.g., making it clear that the coach/athlete can talk about any topic with you), and other awareness (e.g., making an attempt to understand how the coach/athlete is feeling). The following quote was an example of the use of the 'talk about anything' form of openness:

> You are confident enough to have two-way communication and feel assured that if you bring something up outside of sport, then it is not just going to be battered away and it is not going to affect anything. It is just positive from both sides (A4: Female university football player).

A coach focused on the importance of the non-sport communication form of openness within the coach-athlete relationship and showed the way it could help to maintain the quality of the relationship by saying, "Talking a lot, but not just talking about your sport and your coaching but sometimes taking it further than just being coach and athlete, that can build up a better relationship" (C5: Female university trampolining coach).

This dimension directly related to the openness category within Stafford and Canary's (1991) model of relationship maintenance. Openness strategies within the coach-athlete relationship involved the discussion of topics outside of the sporting environment (e.g., work and family life). Communication related to training or competition was categorized within the advice dimension discussed below.

Motivation

The motivation dimension was discussed by all 12 participants. With 31.75% of the raw data points (15.75% coaches and 16% athletes), it was the most frequently mentioned form of relationship maintenance within the coach-athlete relationship. Motivational strategies were defined as those that either indicate individuals' motivation to work with coaches/athletes or coaches/athletes motivating their athletes/coaches to continue working

with them. This category contained four themes: Effort (e.g., putting in effort during training or competition), motivate other (e.g., attempts to motivate the coach/athlete), fun (e.g., attempts to make the interactions enjoyable), and showing ability (e.g., demonstrating that one has the capability of making the relationship successful). In other words, coaches need to show that they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to help the athletes achieve their goals and athletes need to show that they have the abilities to meet the expectations of the coaches. Thus, the fact that both sporting partners were motivated to work with each other should help to maintain the quality of the relationship. The importance of the effort form of motivational strategies is illustrated by an athlete who said, "I definitely would be more committed to a coach who shows you more like, passion and enthusiasm for it" (A5: Female university hockey player).

The next quote underlines the importance of motivating the other through goal-setting.

> We sit down once a month or once a term and kind of set a main goal and then obviously like smaller goals to get there. But I think, just because, you know, you set a main goal so far in advance that you have got to have miniature hurdles to overcome or to achieve to build up that trust that you will get to your main goal (A3: Female national rowing athlete).

The following quote was an example of showing ability in terms of demonstrating to the sporting partner that one is capable of helping him/her to meet his/her sporting targets:

> Another good thing to do, with older kids especially, is to demonstrate, not necessarily your capabilities but you show that you know what you are talking about, that you can help them; when you are coaching them the things that you are saying are actually useful (C1: Male county tennis coach).

There might well be some overlap between the use of these strategies to enhance performance and to maintain a relationship. The key distinction here was that the intention of the use of these strategies was to encourage one's sporting partner to continue the relationship. Performance enhancement might be a consequence of this intention, but a relationship might be maintained without improving performance, such as when enjoyment is the priority. Motivational strategies have not been addressed within relationship maintenance research. Giving one's partner reason to continue the relationship is likely to be applicable, to varying degrees, to all dyads and not just the coach-athlete relationship.

Positivity

The fourth category of relationship maintenance strategies – positivity - was mentioned by 11 out of the 12 participants (5 coaches and 6 athletes) and 10% of the raw data points were categorized under this dimension (5.5% coaches and 4.5% athletes). Positivity was comprised of three themes: Adaptability (e.g., changing one's behavior to suit the preferences of the coach/athlete), fairness (e.g., showing good sportsmanship), and external pressures (e.g., positively dealing with events outside of the coach/athlete's sporting life).

One coach demonstrated the adaptability form of positivity by saying, "You need an approach that is customized to who you are talking to, otherwise it will not work" (C2: Male national football coach). This coach highlighted the importance of adapting one's behaviors to suit the preferences of the athlete to ensure that the partnership is effective and successful. Another athlete, when talking about the maintenance of his commitment to the coach, emphasized the importance of his coach being aware of the external pressures that he was under:

> If you have just finished work or something and you say I have had a bad day at work, you know, I feel tired and the coach might say right well let's not train for an hour and a half tonight, let's train for an hour and put a harder

session in later in the week or something like that. So, I think that is important (A2: Male international track and field athlete).

This dimension was comparable to the positivity category within Stafford and Canary's (1991) model of relationship maintenance. Rather than focusing on acting cheerful and being upbeat when around the partner, however, positivity in this study referred to the importance of adaptability, fairness, and acting positively regarding issues that were outside of the sporting arena (that often and inevitably influence sport-related activities). The key was not just being aware of an issue, but taking positive measures to deal with it and ensuring that it did not have a negative effect on the sporting relationship.

Advice

All 12 participants discussed strategies that fell within this category. This dimension contained 16.5% of the raw data points (8% coaches and 8.5% athletes); it was the second most frequently mentioned category after motivational strategies. Advice was defined as giving one's opinions on problems encountered by the coach or the athlete, as well as giving and receiving feedback in a positive and open way. Advice contained three themes: Sport communication (e.g., discussing issues that are directly related to training or competition), reward feedback (e.g., praising the coach/athlete where appropriate), and constructive feedback (e.g., giving opinions and instructions designed to improve performance rather than criticize). A coach exemplified the constructive feedback form of advice: "Try and, you know, give them good one-to-one feedback, lots of encouragement so you can build that relationship" (C1: Male county tennis coach). Moreover, an athlete underscored the importance of having honest feedback from the coach and explained the way she developed the respect for her coach:

> There are times in the relationship when I respected (coach) for being honest with me. For example, perhaps she thought that I wasn't competing at the right standard or I wasn't doing something correctly, she would always be open and honest with me and I always respected (coach) for that (A1: Female international ice-skater).

Advice was, therefore, an important strategy through which coaches and athletes could maintain the quality of their relationships. Advice played a significant role in giving both rewarding and constructive feedback, as well as in communicating in general about sport. This dimension related to the advice category within Stafford et al.'s (2000) model. The nature of advice given within a romantic relationship was different to that given within the coach-athlete relationship. Advice was a more central process within a sporting relationship because it was viewed as a key element of coaching (e.g., Smith & Smoll, 1990). Thus, the meaning of advice went beyond simply giving opinions regarding problems and included rewarding, praising, and constructive feedback to the coach/athlete.

Support

Ten out of the 12 participants cited support as an important dimension (4 coaches and 6 athletes). A total of 9% of the raw data points were categorized within this dimension (3% coaches and 6% athletes). Support was defined as showing that one was committed to the coach-athlete relationship and available for the coach/athlete in terms of both sports-related and personal issues. This dimension contained three themes: Assurance (e.g., showing that you are committed to the coach/athlete), sport-specific support (e.g., giving support to the coach/athlete after poor performance), and personal support (e.g., giving support to the coach/athlete regarding non-sport issues). One athlete discussed the importance of the coach providing support during competitions and explained that this support helped him to maintain the quality of the relationship:

> Once you are at the competition… they would make sure that every time you have a fight or every time you were performing the routines, he would make sure there was always someone present on the mat to like basically be your coach and guide you and all of that kind of stuff so you very much had their support and you know, one-on-one services in those situations (A6: Male national karate).

The same athlete explained how the coach was there for him when he was going through a difficult time and highlighted the importance of this personal support:

> Like one lesson I was training and my grandpa died like about a couple of days before that and he could see that my head obviously was not in it and he pulled me to the side and he asked me if I was ok and I told him and just having that support from the instructor definitely helps (A6: Male national karate).

This strategy corresponded to the assurance category within Stafford and Canary's (1991) model. It was expanded, however, to highlight the importance of supporting the coach/athlete regarding both sporting and non-sporting issues.

Social Networks

This dimension was mentioned by all participants with 11.5% (6.25% coaches and 5.25% athletes) of raw data units relating to this category. It was defined as spending social time with the coach/athlete as well as mutual friends, and involved interactions that took place away from the track, field, or court. It contained two themes: Socializing (e.g., spending social time with the coach/athlete) and shared network (e.g., spending time with mutual friends). Participants discussed the importance of socializing with reference to the benefits of travelling to competitions together:

> If players can go all together in the same bus it is much better than having people going in their own cars because the travel is important, people talk on travels…We have this tradition of game day, all players, compulsory, have to go to the social and

> have to meet for a drink later. Even if it is only for half an hour, just show up, have a coke and go home, that is alright, as long as they show up and be there for a while and share something with your team mates. That kind of thing is important for having a good relationship with your players (C2: Male national football coach).

Participants also highlighted the importance of socializing that did not occur on the track, field, or court and emphasized how such activities could help maintain relationships:

> I definitely think that them making the effort to go to something like that (end of year awards night), it helps out the club and the team because then we know, we see the club as one and not just the girls and then the coaches (A5: Female university hockey player).

Finally, one athlete discussed the benefits of having mutual friends and affiliations help to maintain the coach-athlete relationship:

> I have been in a couple of coach-athlete relationships where I know the coach's family and I know the male coach's wife and son and daughter and ended up actually being, becoming friends with their son and forming friendships and going out socially with the coaches' sons and being like that and that does improve the bond (A2: Male international track and field athlete).

It may be the case that the use of these strategies not only maintained the coach-athlete relationship, but also had positive outcomes for related factors such as group cohesion (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004).

This dimension was directly related to the social networks dimension within Stafford and Canary's (1991) model. It emphasized the importance of spending time together in social events that occur outside of the sporting environment. Such activities appeared to contribute toward developing and maintaining the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

General Discussion

The present study explored the relationship maintenance strategies used by coaches and athletes to maintain the quality of their athletic relationships. Content analysis of the obtained qualitative data suggested seven main categories: Conflict management, openness, motivation, positivity, advice, support, and social networks. It was proposed that these seven strategies represent the COMPASS model of maintenance strategies in the coach-athlete relationship.

Generally speaking, both the openness and social network strategies were similar to those found in previous research regarding romantic relationships (Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford, et al 2000). Other dimensions were adapted to ensure that they were relevant to the context of coach-athlete relationships. Specifically, the category of conflict management was expanded to include proactive strategies for avoiding conflict. Positivity was re-defined to refer to adaptability, fairness, and managing external pressures. Advice essentially emphasized positive and constructive feedback, and support highlighted the importance of supportive communicative acts.

In the coach-athlete relationship, a motivation category emerged encompassing strategies that were intended to inspire the coach and the athlete or to demonstrate personal motivation. With almost a third of comments relating to this dimension, motivational strategies appeared to play an important role in maintaining the quality of coach-athlete relationships. It could be argued that such strategies were actually related to performance enhancement rather than relationship maintenance. Because relationship quality often has been associated with performance success (e.g., Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), it is possible that these two factors were inextricably linked. A key point to note, however, is that the motivational strategies contained within the COMPASS model focused on motivating one's sporting partner to work with them and not purely to continue in the sport. This difference was key yet subtle. For example, coaches might motivate their athletes to work with them by

making training enjoyable. Relationship maintenance might therefore occur without performance enhancement.

The strategies highlighted through the present study supported previous research within sport psychology. For example, Gould et al., (2007) in their research with award-winning coaches, highlighted the importance of a number of interpersonal skills including using open lines of communication (openness), having a winning record (motivation), caring about their athletes as people (positivity), and having clear expectations and accountability (conflict management). Moreover, this study also added to previous research focused on the importance of support (e.g., Coatsworth & Conroy, 2006; Rees, Hardy & Freeman, 2007).

Based on the findings of this study, the COMPASS model was proposed as a framework for enhancing and maintaining the quality of the coach-athlete relationship (see Figure 1). The model suggested that the use of these seven maintenance strategies would have a positive effect on the quality of the relationship, as defined by Jowett's (2005, 2007) 3+1Cs conceptualization. Correspondingly, the absence of these strategies was theorized to have a negative effect on relationship quality (cf. Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002). These effects were suggested to be bi-directional in that the use of these strategies could influence one's views of the relationship (i.e., direct perceptions), as well as one's beliefs of how the sporting partner perceives the relationship (i.e., meta perceptions). Likewise, it was also suggested that the use of these strategies would influence the sporting partner's direct and meta perceptions.

The development of this conceptual model contributes to the gap in the literature identified by Jowett and Poczwardowski (2007). Specifically, it begins to develop our knowledge of interpersonal communication within the coach-athlete relationship. The COMPASS model might facilitate our understanding of how the elements within Jowett's (2005, 2007) 3+1C conceptualization may be maintained (i.e., closeness, commitment,

complementarity, and co-orientation). Further research could investigate how specific strategies help to maintain the different elements of relationship quality. The COMPASS model, therefore, complements the 3+1C conceptualization, and combining these two theoretical frameworks could provide an integrated approach to the understanding of the nature, content, and the quality of coach-athlete relationships.

Sport psychology consultants, coaches, and athletes may therefore use the COMPASS model to help maintain effective working partnerships. This research might benefit key stakeholders through informing the development of coach education programs and provide a basis upon which interventions may be built and tested.

This study represented an important step in "crossing the chasm" identified by Jowett and Wylleman (2006, p. 123). This "chasm" represents a vast area of knowledge related to the coach-athlete relationship, which merits exploration. The present study and the COMPASS model expanded our knowledge of the interpersonal dynamics between the coach and the athlete by promoting an understanding of the processes necessary for maintaining the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

Research that continues to investigate the relationships between maintenance strategies and the quality of coach-athlete relationships is warranted. Specifically, the roles of individual factors (e.g., age, gender and race, athlete experience and coach qualifications, personality characteristics), relationship factors (e.g., relationship length, typical versus atypical relationships), and environmental factors (e.g., culture, team and individual sports) are worthy of investigation. Research investigating the relationships between maintenance strategies and outcome variables (e.g., performance, satisfaction) would also be of interest. There is also scope for using the COMPASS model to inform an intervention aimed at improving the quality of coach-athlete relationships.

Such further work would help to overcome some of the limitations of the present study. The generalisability of the COMPASS remains unknown and merits further investigation. Thus, the COMPASS model should be tested in different samples to determine the extent to which it could be generalized across diverse coach-athlete relationships. There is also potential to investigate the extent to which the strategies within the COMPASS model are salient in other interpersonal relationships in sport (e.g., relationships between athletes or between owners of clubs and coaches).

The present study was not without methodological limitations. In terms of the participants, the retrospective nature of the interviews might have resulted in events being recalled and described inaccurately. For instance, subsequent success or failure in sport might have the potential to influence how coaches or athletes look back on their previous relationships.

The research study reported here builds upon work that was conducted in the broader relationship psychology research field that aims to unravel the specific relationship maintenance strategies people use. This study found that certain relationship maintenance strategies may be common across different relationship contexts (i.e., romantic and sport). Moreover, evidence indicated that relationship maintenance strategies may be unique to the specific relationship context (e.g., the importance of motivational strategies in sport). Overall, this study and the generated COMPASS model represent an important first step in facilitating our understanding of how relationships, specifically those that pertain to coaches and their athletes, might be maintained. It provides an initial tool that sport psychology researchers and practitioners may use to begin to consider relationship maintenance strategies that can ultimately help coaches and athletes navigate the journey along the road to performance success and personal satisfaction.

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Table 1

Frequency of the Main Categories and Subcategories of Maintenance Strategies in the Coach-Athlete Relationship

Categories / Sub-categories	Frequencies					
	Coaches		Athletes		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Conflict Management	26	6.5	12	3	38	9.5
Proactive	11	2.75	6	1.5	17	4.25
Reactive	15	3.75	6	1.5	21	5.25
Openness	20	5	28	7	48	12
Non-sport communication	9	2.25	9	2.25	18	4.5
Talk about anything	6	1.5	9	2.25	15	3.75
Other awareness	5	1.25	10	2.5	15	3.75
Motivation	63	15.75	64	16	127	31.75
Effort	16	4	14	3.5	30	7.5
Motivate other	13	3.25	15	3.75	28	7
Fun	9	2.25	5	1.25	14	3.5
Show ability	25	6.25	30	7.5	55	13.75
Positivity	22	5.5	18	4.5	40	10
Adaptability	6	1.5	7	1.75	13	3.25
Fairness	7	1.75	1	0.25	8	2
External Pressures	9	2.25	10	2.5	19	4.75
Advice	32	8	34	8.5	66	16.5

Sport communication	10	2.5	5	1.25	15	3.75
Reward feedback	10	2.5	6	1.5	16	4
Constructive feedback	12	3	23	5.75	35	8.75
Support	12	3	24	6	36	9
Assurance	7	1.75	6	1.5	13	3.25
Sport support	5	1.25	14	3.5	19	4.75
Personal support	0	0	4	1	4	1
Social Networks	25	6.25	21	5.25	46	11.5
Socializing	21	5.25	17	4.25	38	9.5
Shared networks	4	1	4	1	8	2

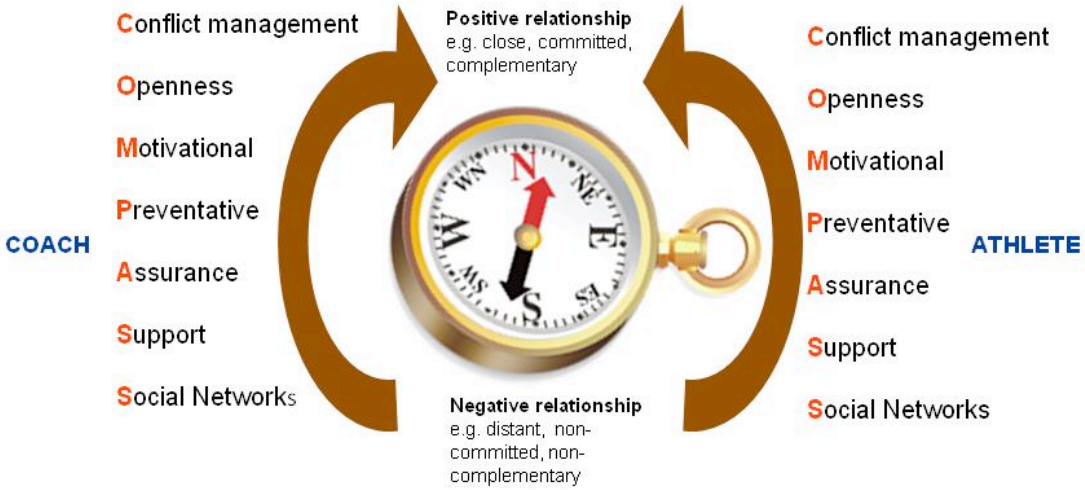

Figure 1. The COMPASS model of relationship maintenance in the coach-athlete relationship.