Coach/Athlete Leadership Relationship and Its Role on Athlete's Self-Worth

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores the relationship between coaches and athletes and how these dynamics impact collegiate volleyball players' self-worth. Through interviews with members of the Virginia Tech volleyball team, the research examines the influence of word choice, leadership approaches and trust within the coach-athlete relationship. The study is grounded in Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which highlights the different experiences athletes have based on if they are in the in-group or the out-group, and how that impacts motivation, performance and emotional well-being. The findings reveal that athletes with supportive and respectful coaching relationships report higher self-worth and better performance, while those exposed to negative or dismissive communication experience diminished motivation, confidence and self-worth. Recommendations for improving the coach-athlete relationship include enhanced emotional intelligence training for coaches, open communication opportunities, and spaces and mental health resources that support the athlete's development beyond performance metrics.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Setting

The relationship between coaches and athletes is a key aspect of athletic performance, personal growth and overall well-being. Athletes spend a lot of time with their coaches so the nature of this relationship can affect the athlete's motivation, self-worth and mental well-being. Many sports, specifically volleyball at the collegiate level, demand a high level of team coordination, individual performance and emotional resilience. The interpersonal relationships between coach and athletes can greatly affect the athlete's self-worth which can influence their attitude towards themselves and others (Coussens, et al., 2024).

College athletes, specifically in team sports like volleyball face a lot of pressure to perform at a high level while also balancing academics, personal life and social dynamics. Coaches are key leaders in an athlete's development, and can influence how athletes perceive themselves, their worth and their roles in the team. The coach-athlete relationship is important for maintaining team cohesion and morale (Coussens, et al., 2024).

In the context of this study, self-worth refers to how athletes perceive their values and abilities in relation to their performance and the feedback they get from their coaches (Popovici & Moraru, 2019). A positive coach-athlete relationship can bolster an athlete's self-esteem and confidence which can lead to better performance on and off the court. On the other hand, a negative coach-athlete relationship can harm an athlete's mental health which can dismantle their motivation and negatively affect athletic performance.

This case study is focused on Virginia Tech's NCAA Division 1 Volleyball team and the primary focus is to understand how athletes perceive their relationship with their coach and how

these dynamic influences their sense of self-worth. This study aims to provide insights into how leadership, communication and trust between coaches and athletes can foster an environment where athletes feel valued, seen and confident in their abilities on and off the court. This research draws upon a qualitative case study designed to capture the athlete's experiences while providing a detailed understanding of the impact that coach-athlete leadership relationships have on athletes' self-worth and performance. The setting of this study is the VT volleyball team and how its factors can create an environment to examine these relationships and how they affect the athlete's self-worth. The findings from this study aim to inform coaching practices, promote positive relationship building tools and support the development of athletes in their athletic career and their personal life.

Statement of the Problem

The leadership relationship between coaches and athletes impacts greatly how athletes view themselves. Exploring this relationship will give a greater understanding of how that relationship can be improved and how to help athletes view themselves in a better way. This relationship is important not only for the athlete's growth as a positive, ethical and moral person, but for the team's performance as a whole (Gels, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore perspectives on coach/athlete leadership relationship and its role on self-worth from the perspective of players on a collegiate volleyball team.

Significance of the Problem

The coach-athlete relationship can play a very important role in shaping athlete's self-worth on and off the court (Popovici & Moraru, 2019). Understanding the dynamics of this relationship is important for improving the athlete's personal development. It is also important to recognize the major effects that coaching styles and the coach's word choice have on the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. When the coach-athlete relationship lacks quality, it can lead to a decrease in the athlete's self-worth (Gels, 2017). This low self-worth can lead to low quality performance by the athletes and athletes' well-being which can then affect the team's performance. When the coach-athlete relationship is of high quality, it can foster a climate where athletes feel valued, seen and respected which improves their self-worth. The relationship quality outlined in the LMX theory impacts athletes' views on themselves. Low quality LMX relationships come from poor communication and minimal support can lead to athletes feeling isolated, unvalued and unseen. A lack of connection between a coach and an athlete leads to lower self-worth and lower performance levels. An article by Gels (2017) shows how low LMX relationships can affect athletes. According to the findings in the article by Gels in 2017, athletes who experience low quality LMX relationships feel disconnected from their coaches, which leads to low self-worth. This can lead to more negative experiences like frustration and lack of motivation which affects their performances on and off the court (Gels, 2017).

On the other hand, high LMX relationships come from mutual respect, trust and open communication and these can lead to higher self-worth (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This can help athletes feel supported, confident and can also help athletes thrive which can lead to athlete's success on and off the court. Exploring the coach-athlete relationship can improve individual and team outcomes. Understanding how self-worth is influenced by coaching behaviors and LMX quality is important because it can provide insight on how coaches can make changes to their

leadership approaches to enhance an athlete's perception about themselves which can improve their self-worth and performance on and off the court.

Project Objectives

The first project objective is to analyze how the relationship between coaches and athletes can impact an athlete's self-worth. The second objective is to explore how Leader Member Exchange Theory can be connected to the athlete's experience. This is all done by analyzing a collegiate volleyball team and exploring the factors of the coach athlete relationship and its impact on athlete's self-worth. The third objective is to provide recommendations for programs to improve the coach athlete relationship which will improve the athlete's self-worth.

Definition of Terms

The three key terms for this study are self-worth, Leader-Member Exchange Theory and coach-athlete relationship.

1. Self-worth is a term that refers to an individual's perception of themselves, their value and worth as a person (Ackerman, 2018). It refers to how much an individual believes they are deserving of something like love and respect. Self-worth goes hand in hand with self-esteem and confidence. It is something that can be influenced by personal experiences, relationships, and validation. It is a factor in someone's emotional well-being and personal development.
2. The second term is Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX Theory) and this is a leadership theory that focuses on the relationship between a leader and their followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This theory highlights that leaders develop different types of relationships with their followers which can be categorized into two groups: in-group and

out-group. In-group members usually have a great relationship with the leader and out-group members usually are on the outside and their relationship with the leader is not the best. This theory suggests that the quality of the leader-follower relationship can affect performance, motivation, and self-worth. In this specific context, the LMX theory explains how a coach's relationship with an athlete can influence the athletes' development, performance, commitment and self-worth on and off the court.

3. The third key term is coach-athlete relationship. This term describes the dynamic between a coach and an athlete that influences the athlete's development, performance, commitment and well-being. This relationship should be built on mutual trust, respect and communication. A positive coach-athlete relationship is very important for an athlete's growth and well-being on and off the court as it impacts their self-worth, self-esteem, confidence and mental health (Coussens, et. al., 2024). The quality of this relationship has a direct effect in the athlete's performance and their views of themselves in sports and out of sports.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this study. First, the sample size is relatively small n=5, on the VT volleyball team. The reason for this is so the data would be more in-depth and could provide a better understanding of the situation. This could affect the ability to generalize the findings across different sports, teams or coaching styles. Because the study is focused on a specific group of athletes, the ability of it being applied to other contexts is limited. The second limitation is the subjectivity in defining the relationship's quality. This means that the measurement of the quality of the coach-athlete relationship can vary depending on how different people interpret and assess the relationship. This subjectivity makes it very difficult to create

universal standards to evaluate the relationship. It makes it difficult to generalize the relationship as it is based on specific people's opinions and interpretations. The third is time constraints of the study.

This study has been in the works since November of 2024. For a study like this, time is of the essence and a couple of months is not nearly enough time. This time constraint goes hand in hand with the sample size and the time constraint restricted the depth of the investigation which affected the sample size. Another reason why time constraint is a limitation is because it also restricts the depth of the study regarding how coach-athlete relationships evolve over time. For example, one athlete can have a bad relationship now but maybe in a couple of months the relationship can be salvaged, and this dynamic will not be included in this study because of the time constraint. The fourth limitation identified is that are external influences on an athlete's self-worth that does not involve the coach-athlete relationship. This study does not account for external actors like family dynamics, peer relationships, media influence or even personal life events. These factors can impact athletes' views about themselves and can also be independent of the coach-athlete relationship. The final limitation is cultural differences. Athletes and coaches have different backgrounds and cultural differences that play a role in shaping the coach-athlete relationship. These differences influence communication styles and preferences, expectations and perceptions of leadership which can limit the study's ability to be used across diverse cultural settings.

Basic Assumptions

The basic assumption for this study is that the coach-athlete relationship plays a critical role in shaping an athlete's self-image, motivation and performance. Another basic assumption is that positive leadership by coaches can promote athlete's growth on and off the court. The third

basic assumption is that a positive coach-athlete relationship contributes to better performance. The last assumption is that communication and mutual respect are pillars of a strong coach-athlete relationship.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This literature review will cover three key sections. These sections are Coach-Athlete Relationship, LMX in Sports, and Self-Worth.

Coach-Athlete Relationship

The coach athlete relationship is central to an athlete's development. Research has demonstrated that the relationship between coaches and athletes significantly impacts an athlete's motivation, self-esteem, performance, mental health, and overall well-being (Coussens, et al. 2025). The following literature explore some studies that highlights the importance of this relationship.

Relational dynamics within the coach-athlete relationship emphasizes how key factors like trust, respect and communication contribute to the quality of this relationship. Jowett and Cockerill (2002) highlighted that a strong relationship between coaches and athletes have a positive influence on athletes' self-esteem, performance and motivation. The research also highlights that a high level of involvement from the coach can facilitate the athlete's growth and can create a positive climate and environment for athletes to thrive.

Gould and colleagues (2009) studied how the coach-athlete relationship influences psychological preparation while focusing on the Olympics. The findings showed that athletes who experienced positive and supportive relationships with their coaches were better able to manage the psychological pressures of high-level competition. Specifically, these athletes were

more likely to have higher levels of self-confidence, self-worth and resilience. This study emphasizes that effective coaching is more than just physical training; it involves emotional support and a positive relationship that are key to an athlete's success.

Additionally, research has examined the influence of coaching on athlete development on and off the court (Vella et al., 2013). Vella and his colleagues found that a positive coach-athlete relationship that comes from mutual respect, emotional support and clear communication can lead to an enhanced athlete well-being. This study also highlights that coaches who were more in touch to the emotional needs of their athletes were able to better create safe environments for athletes to develop strong self-worth and motivation. This research can connect to literature on emotional intelligence which explains that people with high emotional intelligence have strong interpersonal skills and can manage both their own emotions and understand the emotions of people around them (Landry, 2024). Thus, coaches with higher emotional intelligence may form stronger relationships with athletes.

Other research has shown that the coach-athlete relationship can be examined from a wide range of angles. It highlights how the quality of coach-athlete relationship influences athletic performance and psychological outcomes like self-worth and satisfaction (Jowett & Shanmugan, 2016). The relationship has different aspects to it like technical coaching and emotional aspects which are all very important. It emphasizes that positive relationships are connected to greater athlete commitment, better coping mechanisms under pressure and a greater sense of self-worth (Jowett & Crockerill, 2002).

LMX in Sports

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory provides a framework for understanding the quality of relationships between leaders which in this case is the coaches and their followers

which in this case is the athletes. In sports, the LMX theory emphasizes the importance of the coach-athlete relationship and how it can affect athlete's performance, motivation and overall well-being (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by trust, mutual respect and open communication which can lead to positive outcomes for athletes. The following literature explores studies that focus on the application of LMX theory in sports.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory and its development has been studied over the past 25 years. There are two main types of relationships in LMX which are the in-group (high quality) and out-group (low quality). High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by high levels of trust, respect and open communication which leads to an increase in motivation and performance in followers which in this case it is the athletes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Low-quality LMX relationships are characterized by low levels of trust, motivation, respect, and motivation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

LMX theory can be applied in different organizational settings like sports. According to (Case, 1998), the Leader Member Exchange Theory has potential for adding insight to the study of leadership behavior in sport setting. In another study conducted by Liden and colleagues in 1997, it highlights the importance of leader-member exchanges in enhancing motivation, satisfaction and performance. There is a connection between LMX theory and its application to sports. More specifically, how the quality of the relationship between coaches and athletes influences individual performance and team dynamics. Research shows that if the coach/athlete relationship can positively impact athletic performance (Getu, 2023). A study conducted by case in 1998 shows that if a coach is aware of the special "in" and "out" exchange relationships, it's possible that they may adjust to the needs of the out-group. Members of the in-group do extra things for the leaders and the leaders do the same for them and members of the out-group do

what is required of them and do not give that extra effort and the leader reciprocates this attitude (Northouse, 2016).

Self-Worth

An athlete's sense of self-worth is linked to their identity and their perceptions of success or failure. Research has shown that a strong sense of self-worth can enhance athlete's resilience confidence and ability to cope with challenges (Li, et. al., 2023). Low self-worth can lead to anxiety, burnout, frustration and a decrease in performance (Popovici & Moraru, 2019). The following literature reviews explores studies on the role of self-worth in athletes. Coussens et al (2025) discuss the role of self-worth in athletes' performance and mental health. The authors explain how self-worth affects performance outcomes and influences psychological well-being. This study showed that athletes with high self-worth are better able to handle failure and setbacks while having a strong sense of motivation and good mental health. On the other hand, athletes with low self-worth experience stress, anxiety and a decrease in motivation. The study highlights the need for athletes to develop a stable and intrinsic sese of self-worth which can help their mental health and their success.

Motivation and self-image have a huge impact on an athlete's performance. Intrinsic motivation and self-image are key drivers to an athlete's performance (Popovici & Moraru, 2019). It is important to foster a positive self-image and motivation in athletes because these factors are crucial to achieving positive self-worth which leads to good performance and success. There is a relationship between self-worth, self-confidence and self-esteem in athletes. Self-worth is a key construct that influences an athlete's overall performance and well-being. Athletes with a high sense of self-worth have a strong sense of confidence, resilience and a more positive self-image which are important to achieving success (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2004).

Research also suggests that self-worth based on factors like a coach relationship is more beneficial for athletes than self-worth that depends on external validation like winning or public recognition (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2004).

Chapter 3: Methodology Section

Research Design

For this study, a qualitative research method was used specifically, using a case study approach. A case study is suitable for exploring complex experiences especially when the researcher (in this case me) is seeking an in-depth understanding of a specific group, situation or setting. (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). By choosing this method, the focus was on a bounded group of individuals which in this case, it is the Virginia Tech (VT) volleyball team. This approach allows for a comprehensive study of experiences, behaviors and dynamics within the team and the relationships between athletes and coaches (Tenny et al., 2022). Qualitative case studies allow the flexibility to gather detailed and contextual data through multiple sources like interviews and observations (Tenny et al., 2022). Through this lens, a deeper understanding of how the team functions, the interpersonal relationships between players and coaches, and other unique factors that contribute to their performance, team culture, self-worth and challenges, was studied.

The case study design is useful for making connections between theoretical concepts and real-world practice. In the context of this study, the aim is to explore how the relationship between athlete and coach can impact their experiences and how the athletes view themselves. By focusing on this specific group, it allowed for a focus on the insights that might not be easily observed in less specific research settings. A qualitative case study allows for a deep dive into

participants' perspectives and experiences (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). Through this study, a greater understanding of athletes' motivations and emotions is achieved which can help understand their behaviors and interactions between each other and their coaches. This method also allows to make connections between their lived experiences and broader theories like LMX and self-worth in athletes.

In conclusion, this qualitative research method is the best option to explore the complexities of an individual's relationship with coaches and its different aspects. This allows the gathering of detailed insights that are specific to the VT volleyball team while also offering broader implications for other athletic teams in similar contexts. Overall, this is the best choice for a study that focuses on a specific group of people and their specific experiences that can mostly be explored through qualitative data.

Participant Selection

The participants in this study are members of the Virginia Tech Volleyball team. They were specifically selected to provide a diverse range of insights into their individual experiences and relationships with their coach. Participants were chosen based on a combination of factors, including their willingness to participate, availability and their ability to reflect on their experiences in a meaningful way. The 5 players that were chosen were willing and able to share their personal experiences, perspectives and insights. Because the focus was to understand the personal narratives of team members who can offer different viewpoints, the selection of these participants was purposeful. By selecting a small, manageable group of players, it was ensured that each person's voice is heard in-depth which can enable a detailed exploration of their thoughts, feelings and experiences within the context of the volleyball team, the relationship with the coach and how it affects the athlete's self-worth.

Players selected represent different roles on the team like starters, nonstarters or people in different positions like setters, outside hitters, middles and this helps capture a range of perspectives. This helps to ensure that the findings reflect the diversity of experiences within the team instead of just focusing on one subgroup of players.

To maintain a high level of data quality, participants were required to have been a member of the team for at least one full season so that they have a deep understanding of the overall environment. This ensures that participants can provide informed insights into how the relationship works and the factors that impact their individual experiences.

All participants were recruited voluntarily and their involvement in the study is based on informed consent. This informed consent provided to participants included explaining the purpose of the research, the process of data collection and how their responses will be used. This allowed for the participants to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in a safe and confidential environment. The participants' identities have been kept anonymous, and pseudonyms have been used to protect their privacy.

Through this process, my goal has been to create an environment where participants feel safe and comfortable expressing and sharing their true feelings and insights. This is essential for generating meaningful and authentic data for this qualitative case study.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Data collection and instrumentation were carried out using a structured approach to ensure the reliability of the information gathered and the privacy of the participants involved. The process began with sending recruitment emails to my target participants which were carefully drafted to provide clear information about the study's purpose, objectives and potential

benefits of their participation. The participants were informed with the research questions, the time commitment required for the interview and any other relevant information that allowed them to decide about joining the study.

Once the participants were selected and consented to participate, in-person interviews were scheduled with them. The semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) were designed to gather qualitative data on the topic at hand with open-ended questions that encouraged in-depth responses. During the interviews, there was an emphasis in creating a comfortable and respectful environment where participants felt safe sharing their thoughts and experiences. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent using Zoom to ensure accurate documentation of their responses. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim to maintain the integrity of the data for analysis.

To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, the data was made anonymous by assigning pseudonyms to each participant, ensuring that their real names were not used in any written reports. This was done in compliance with ethical standards listed in IRB and this allowed to safeguard personal information that if it was made public, it can affect the athlete's experience and life. Any identifying details like names were altered in the transcripts to prevent indirect identification of participants. The use of pseudonyms and careful handling of the data created a balanced sense of transparency in the research process while respecting the participants' privacy.

The entire process of data collection, from recruitment to transcription was carried out in a very careful manner that ensures the study's validity and ethical treatments of participants.

Data Analysis

The participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity and protect their privacy throughout the research process. These pseudonyms were either chosen by the participants themselves or were given to them by me. In some cases, participants felt more comfortable selecting names that held personal significance while others preferred to let the researcher assign a neutral pseudonym. This approach preserved confidentiality and allowed participants to maintain a sense of ownership over their identity in the study which ensured they felt respected, heard, seen and involved in the process.

Once the semi-structured interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed verbatim to capture the full concept of the participants' responses. The transcription process involved attention to detail, ensuring that every word was accurately recorded. This was a very important step to maintain the integrity of the data and to ensure that the participants' voices were heard and fully represented.

After transcription, the interview data was analyzed using in vivo coding. In vivo coding involves identifying and coding significant phrases the participants used in their own language which contained insights to their experiences and perspectives (Delve, et al., 2025). This method allows for a deep understanding of the data because it reflects the participants' own words. The interview transcripts were reviewed, and key phrases were highlighted and assigned initial codes based on patterns or significant comments. Following the in vivo coding process, the process of collapsing these codes into thematic findings began. This step involved grouping related codes together and putting them into broader themes that captured the patterns across all the interviews (Delve, et al., 2025). These themes helped to identify key concepts, issues and insights that were common among the participants. Thematic analysis allowed for the data to be put together and generate interpretations where individual experiences and shared perspectives could be

highlighted. This process of collapsing codes into themes was important for identifying the main findings of the study and drawing connections between participants' responses which led to a deeper understanding of the research question. By employing in vivo coding followed by thematic analysis, it was ensured that the participants' voices were at the center of the study while making sense of the data in a structured and comprehensive way.

Timeline and Budget

Budget is not a factor in this study, as the research is being conducted within the framework of an academic setting where financial constraints are a nonfactor. The study was study was not designed to focus on the need for eternal funding or material resources. The project has relied on institutional support and available resources to facilitate the data collection and analysis phases.

The timeline of the project was carefully planned to ensure a clear structure and timely completion. The first key milestone was the submission of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, which was submitted by the end of 2024. The IRB approval was crucial to ensure that the study adhered to ethical standards. Having the IRB submission completed by this time was important because it allowed enough time for any revisions or additional documentation required by the board which ensured the research could proceed smoothly without any delays.

Data collection began in early spring, specifically in January and February. During this time, participants were recruited, interviews were conducted, and the collected data was transcribed. This stage was essential because it ensured a strong foundation for the analysis as the gathered data would provide valuable insights into the research topic. The early spring

timeline also helped ensure that the data was collected when participants were available and willing to participate which helped the quality and depth of the interviews.

Once the data was collected, the analysis phase took place during the month of March. During this month, the focus was on coding the interview transcripts using the in vivo coding method and collapsed the coded phrases into thematic findings. This stage allowed the identification of patterns and conclusions from the data. During this stage, the goal was to synthesize the data in a way that would highlight the most significant themes while honoring the participants' perspectives.

By the end of March, progress was made in analyzing the data and then, began drafting the results and the final paper. The writing phase involved putting the thematic findings into a narrative that addressed the research questions. This process also included reviewing the literature, refining the analysis and put the relevant findings into the final document to support the arguments and conclusions.

The plan for this project is to defend the final paper in May. This defense will serve as an opportunity to present the findings, discuss the implications of the research and receive feedback from committee members. The timeline has been structured to allow for thorough preparation of the defense and allowing time to revise the paper as needed based on the feedback received. The timeline also ensured that the study was completed effectively by having clear milestones to track progress and ensure the research was completed within the required time frame.

Chapter 4: Findings

Through data analysis four key themes were established: Coach-Athlete Relationships and Communication, Coach-Athlete Relationship and Self-Worth, Leader Member Exchange and

Coach-Athlete Relationship, and Suggestions for Improvement. Table 1 illustrates the overall findings and examples of significant statements.

Table 1. Thematic Findings

Significant statement	**Key codes**	**Themes**
I guess the response to the question would be not great. Her inability to make me believe in myself	Bad relationship with coach Coach thinking impacts players negatively	**Coach/Athlete Relationship and Communication**
This relationship has made me question my worth Question myself off the court as a person, not just an athlete	Bad relationship = low self-worth Lack of self-worth as athlete = lack of self-worth as person	**Role of Coach/Athlete Relationship in Self-worth**
I feel like my relationship with our head coach makes me question a lot of parts of me and it brings me doubts. My relationship with my coach is good.	Being in the out-group Being in the in-group	**Leader Member Exchange and Coach-Athlete Relationship**
a self-worth workshop for staff and players in the same room might be beneficial. But there has to be a mediator so that both sides get heard and the relationship can improve on both sides as well. Maybe we can start with just the players and then just the staff and once we are all in a better headspace, we can meet like players and staff with sports psychology.	Resource Idea Possible solution idea	**Suggestions for Improvement**

Coach-Athlete Relationships and Communication

The first objective of this study was to explore how the coach-athlete relationship is shaped by various factors, particularly word choice and the overall dynamic between the two

parties. One of the key findings is that the nature of this relationship, whether it was positive or negative can significantly impact an athlete's overall experience, both emotionally and psychologically. Many participants expressed that the way their coaches communicated with them influenced how they viewed their coach and themselves.

For some, communication from their coaches was marked by negative word choices and critical tones that felt harsh or dismissive. For example, Morgan stated that her coach said to her "My 2-year-old daughter is better at setting than you" and she described how degrading comments, sarcasm or constant criticism made athletes feel unvalued, disrespected and unmotivated. This was also supported by Mac stating that her coach said, "You block like a wet dog" and she also described how these degrading comments made her feel disrespected and unvalued as an athlete and as a person. This kind of negative communication created a lack of trust and emotional distance which led to the athletes describing their relationship with their coach as poor. The impact of these interactions extended beyond the sport itself as some athletes reported lower self-confidence and a sense of decreasing self-worth because of these negative dynamics.

One the other hand, some athletes shared experiences with their coach that were positive. They shared that they felt like their coach used communication to uplift, motivate and support them. The coach frequently used positive affirmations, constructive feedback and words of encouragement that helped build trust and foster a sense of connection. Sam stated that "because she (the coach) thinks of me so highly, her (the coach) words to me are positive for the most part and that makes me feel incredible". Athletes who experienced this kind of communication described their relationship with their coaches as strong, respectful, and motivating. They felt more confident in their abilities, more open to feedback and more engaged in their sport.

The contrast in experiences highlights the powerful role that communication and leadership play in shaping the emotional climate of the coach and athlete relationship. It also highlights how crucial the coach-athlete relationship is to an athlete's experience and how it can positively or negatively impact them as players and as people. The findings suggest that when coaches are intentional with their language and approach, they can create a more positive, supportive environment that benefits the athlete's performance and overall well-being.

Coach-Athlete Relationship and Self-Worth

The second objective of this study was to examine how the quality of the coach-athlete relationship influences the athlete's sense of self-worth. The findings reveal a connection between the nature of this relationship and the way athletes perceive and value themselves. Athletes who reported having a supportive, respectful and trusting relationship with their coach often described feeling seen, heard and appreciated as athletes and people. For example, Sam explained "I feel like I am worth her time and praise and that makes me feel so confident". This positive connection contributed to a greater sense of self-worth where athletes felt more confident, motivated and capable in their personal development and athletic performance. These athletes shared that being encouraged, positively affirmed and constructively guided by their coach made them feel like they were worthy, like they mattered, and their contributions were recognized. Sam supported this by saying "This confidence transfers form the volleyball court onto every part of my life so my relationship with our head coach has been a very positive thing for me and my self-worth".

In contrast, athletes who experienced a strained relationship with their coach expressed significantly lower feelings of self-worth. These participants described feeling demeaned, disrespected, degraded or even invisible in the eyes of their coach. When coaches relied on harsh

criticism, ignored their athletes' emotional needs or created environments that lacked trust and support, athletes internalized these interactions as a reflection of their value. Over time, this led to feelings of insecurity and self-doubt. Many athletes in this group shared that they began to question their abilities, withdraw emotionally from their sport, and lose motivation to improve. Jac supported this by saying "She makes me feel like I can do nothing right". Another player, Emma, said "It's really sad and it (the relationship) has made me into a shell of a player, and it has affected me as a human being as well".

These differing experiences had an impact on athletic performance. Athletes with a strong sense of self-worth tended to report lower levels of performance anxiety, greater focus and a freer expressive approach to their sport. They felt less burdened by fear of failure and more empowered to take risks, try new skills and enjoy the process of competing or training. In contrast, athletes with a lower sense of self-worth described experiencing heightened performance anxiety, emotional tension and a constant fear of making mistakes. This negatively impacted their ability to perform at their full potential and often led to burnout or a decreased desire to continue participating in their sport.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the emotional and psychological effects of the coach-athlete relationship impact an athlete on and off the court. A coach's ability to foster or diminish an athlete's self-worth is not only important to the athlete's mental health and well-being, but also plays a significant role in their performance, development, motivation and overall success in their sport.

Leader Member Exchange and Coach-Athlete Relationship

The third objective of this study was to explore how the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory can be used as a framework to better understand the dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship and how athletes can have different experiences based on the quality of their relationship with their coach. LMX theory focuses on the quality of the relationship between a leader and each individual member within a group and it is relevant in the sports context. It emphasizes that leaders (in this case, coaches) do not treat all subordinates (athletes) the same; instead, they form unique relationships with each athlete which can fall along a continuum from high quality (in-group) and low quality (out-group) exchanges.

In this study, the findings supported the core features of LMX theory. Athletes who were part of what could be described as the "in-group" by having a good relationship with their coach, reported strong, supportive relationships with their coaches. These athletes felt trusted, respected and valued. They often receive more feedback, encouragement and personal attention from their coach, which helped them develop as athletes and individuals. This was supported by Sam stating, "I feel like I am worth her time and praise and that makes me feel so confident.". These high-quality exchanges contributed to a positive training environment, greater motivation and increased self-worth. Athletes in this group often felt a strong sense of loyalty and commitment to their coach and their sport.

On the other hand, athletes who fell into the "out-group" category by having a poor relationship with the coach described a much different experience. These athletes often felt overlooked, undervalued or even alienated by their coach. These athletes often receive more demeaning communication, less attention, minimal feedback or harsh criticism from their coaches. As a result, they were more likely to experience frustration, emotional disconnection, and a reduced sense of belonging. This is supported by Mac explaining that "I feel so

misunderstood with her and I constantly feel like she is putting me down as a player which then makes me doubt myself as a human". These low-quality exchanges often correlated with decreases self-worth and a feeling of being on the outside looking in.

What makes LMX theory especially useful in understanding the coach-athlete dynamic is its ability to explain why two athletes on the same team and under the same coach, can report different experiences (Diebig, et. al., 2024). It brings attention to the importance of individual relationships and the unequal distribution of time, attention and emotional support that can occur in a team setting.

Overall, the findings suggest that applying LMX theory to the sport's context provides a valuable lens for identifying strengths and weaknesses in the coach-athlete relationship. It underscores the need for coaches to be aware of how their behaviors and word choices may impact each athlete differently and how fostering high-quality exchanges with all athletes can lead to a more inclusive, positive, supportive and high-performing team environment.

Suggestions for Improvement

The fourth objective of this study was to propose possible solutions aimed at improving the coach-athlete relationship and by extension, the athlete's sense of self-worth. Based on the findings, it is clear that communication and emotional support all play critical roles in shaping these relationships. One of the most promising solutions is to intentionally create environments where open and honest conversations between coaches and athletes can take place. These conversations would serve as a safe space to address the dynamics of their relationships, clarify expectations and collaboratively explore ways to improve communication and trust.

This could take several forms. For example, Emma suggested “Maybe the courses can start with just players and then just staff and once we are all in a better headspace, we can meet together like players and staff with sports psychology”. This can also include having dedicated sessions where only coaches are present where they can get educated on the emotional and psychological impacts of their communication and relationship with athletes. These sessions could include real-life scenarios, athlete testimonials and training on emotional intelligence, feedback delivery and supportive leadership practices. Similarly, sessions where it is just the athletes to give them an opportunity to express their experiences in a space where they feel heard and validated. These sessions can help athletes articulate their needs and concerns and begin to reflect on how their interactions with their coaches have either positively or negatively influenced their performance and self-worth.

Ideally, joint sessions involving both coaches and athletes would also be implemented to foster conversation and mutual understanding. In these settings, it may be helpful to include a neutral third-party facilitator or mediator like a sports psychologist, counselor or trained staff member who can guide the conversation while ensuring that all voices are heard and navigating difficult conversations. This structure can reduce the power imbalance that often exists in the coach-athlete relationship and create a foundation for shared solutions, empathy and growth. This idea was supported by Morgan who suggested that “players make a list of things the coaches have said that have affected their self-worth and say them to the coaches and that can help start the conversation of how it’s affecting the player” between athletes and coaches.

Another critical solution is to prioritize the emotional well-being of athletes by acknowledging and supporting the development of their self-worth. Coaches and sport organizations should be paying attention to how fragile or resilient an athlete’s view themselves

can be and provide access to tools and resources that nurture confidence, self-efficacy and personal development. This could include workshops on mental wellness, mentorship programs or individual goal-setting sessions that highlight personal growth and effort rather than just performance outcomes.

Finally, while the coach plays a significant role in shaping the athlete's experience, it is equally important to empower athletes to build their self-worth independently of that relationship. This could involve encouraging athletes to engage in activities or communities outside of their sport where they can explore other aspects of their identity and build confidence in different settings. Activities such as journaling, peer support groups, or involvement in leadership or volunteer roles can help athletes develop a more well-rounded and resilient sense of self.

Together, these solutions address both sides of the relationship and recognize that meaningful change involves more than just a change in behavior. It requires the cultivation of a culture with mutual respect, empathy and open communication while also helping athletes find tools to thrive regardless of the challenges they face in their coach-athlete dynamics.

Summary

This study examined the complex dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship, and the importance of relationship quality (i.e. in-group vs. out-group) significantly influence an athlete's emotional well-being, sense of self-worth and performance.

The first key finding is that communication is a central factor in shaping the coach-athlete relationship. Athletes exposed to negative communication like harsh criticism, sarcasm, or dismissiveness reported feeling disrespected, unmotivated, and emotionally distanced from their

coach. On the other hand, those who experienced positive communication, including affirmations, encouragement and respectful feedback felt more confident, valued and engaged in their sport. These differences shaped how athletes viewed both their coaches and themselves.

The quality of the coach-athlete relationship has a direct impact on an athlete's self-worth. Supportive and trusting relationships built the athlete's confidence and motivation while toxic or strained dynamics led to feelings of insecurity, anxiety and emotional withdrawal. Athletes with higher self-worth reported better performance and less anxiety and those with lesser self-worth struggled with performance pressure, a decrease in performance and sometimes lost passion for their sport.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory effectively explains why athletes under the same coach can have very different experiences. Coaches often form unique relationships with each athlete and place some in the "in-group" (receiving more attention, support and trust) and placing others in the "out-group" (receiving less engagement and support) (Diebig, et. al., 2024). Athletes in the in-group felt motivated and valued and athletes in the out-group felt alienated and overlooked which leads to a decrease in self-worth and motivation.

Several solutions were identified to improve coach-athlete relationships and support athlete well-being. These solutions include creating structured spaces for open dialogue between coaches and athletes, offering training for coaches on communication and leadership, providing athletes with opportunities to express their concerns and reflect on their experiences, facilitating joint sessions with neutral mediators to foster mutual understanding and supporting athletes' self-worth through mental wellness resources, mentorship, and non-sport activities that promote confidence and identity beyond athletics.

Overall, the findings emphasize that improving the coach-athlete relationship requires systemic changes that focus on coaching techniques and the culture.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The coach-athlete relationship plays a pivotal role in shaping athletes' self-worth, motivation and performance. This study found that word choice, leadership behavior and individual attention are core factors that influence how athletes view themselves and their athletic experience. Athletes who felt respected, encouraged and supported by their coaches showed higher levels of self-esteem, motivation and engagement. In contrast, athletes exposed to critical or dismissive coaching reported feeling devalued, emotionally withdrawn, and less committed to the sport. The application of LMX Theory provided a great lens which helped to understand the different experiences among athletes on the same team. High-quality relationships built on trust and mutual respect fostered growth, while low-quality exchanges led to emotional disconnect and reduced performance. Ultimately, the quality of the coach-athlete relationship has a huge impact on both personal development, team success and an athlete's self-worth. This highlights the need for a culture of empathy, communication and support in college athletics.

The findings of this study reveal how the quality of the coach-athlete relationship can be significantly influenced by the word choices used by coaches. When communication is negative, inconsistent, overly critical or lacking empathy, it can lead to a breakdown in trust and connection between the coaches and the athlete. Similarly, being in the in-group vs the out-group may create different experiences where athletes either feel undervalued and unsupported or valued and supported (Vossooghi, 2018). These relationships can positively or negatively impact the athlete and can contribute to increased or decreased self-worth, lower or higher motivation or in some cases, a loss of passion for the sport altogether (Kleinhesselink, 2019).

However, the findings also point a pathway toward improvement. Many of the issues identified can be addressed through more intentional support systems, including resources that help coaches develop emotional intelligence, communication skills, and athlete-centered leadership approaches. Creating space for open, ongoing conversations between the coaches and athletes can foster healthier dynamics with mutual respect. The findings that came from this study show the need for systemic attention to aspects of the coach and athlete relationship that can improve athletic performance and support the athlete's overall well-being.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed to improve the coach-athlete relationship and enhance an athlete's self-worth.

The first recommendation is having coach education and emotional intelligence training. This could be done by having athletic departments implement workshops for coaches that focus on emotional intelligence, effective communication skills and athlete-centered leadership. These programs should emphasize the psychological impact of coaching behavior and give coaches the proper tools to foster trust and motivation.

The second recommendation is encouraging structured dialogue between coaches and athletes. Establishing comfortable and safe spaces for open conversation can help athletes and coaches share concerns, provide feedback and strengthen mutual understanding. These facilitated sessions with a neutral mediator or third party like a sports psychologist can help bridge communication gaps.

The third recommendation is having athlete support and reflection programs. This could be done by providing athletes with resources such as journaling prompts, peer support groups or

mentorship opportunities that encourage self-reflection and reinforce their identity outside of their sport. These programs can help athletes build internal self-worth independent of external validation and their sport.

The fourth recommendation is to apply LMX-informed leadership strategies. This could be done by encouraging coaches to reflect on the variability in their relationships with different athletes and work toward creating equal and high-quality exchanges with all team members. This includes recognizing potential “in-group” and “out-group” dynamics and striving for inclusion and balance.

The fifth recommendation is to incorporate institutional policies for athlete well-being. Athletic programs should develop formal policies that promote mental health, emotional well-being and personal development. These policies should ensure that coaching practices align with ethical standards that prioritize respect, fairness and athlete empowerment. Athletic departments should also have policies that would be enforced if coaching practices do not align with ethical standards and there should be a punishment for the coaches.

The last recommendation is tied to future research. The first area of future research should focus on conducting a similar study but from the coach’s perspective. This will provide a deeper understanding of the coach’s point of view and how these dynamics can be different based on them. The second area for future research regards to how did the in-group and out-group groups occurred in the first place. This can help clarify what factors contribute to the creation of these group dynamics.

By applying these recommendations, institutions can foster healthier team environments, enhance athlete development on and off the court and promote long-term success as a person and an athlete.

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Appendices

A. Information of Consent

Thank you for meeting with me. I am just going to inform you of certain information before we start this interview. Your participation in this interview will be anonymous as you have the chance to choose a pseudonym, or I will appoint one for you. I will be using some direct quotes from your interview, but your identity will be protected. This interview will be semi-structured as I will be asking you 5 questions but will give you the chance to elaborate on whatever you feel fit. It will take around 30 minutes. Knowing this information, do you agree to participate in this qualitative research study?

B. Interview protocol

Interviewee:

Date & Time of Interview:

Participant Selected Pseudonym:

Introduction: I want to thank you for taking the time to be interviewed today. What we discuss will be recorded and later transcribed. Additionally, I'll be making notes throughout our interview. When you see me look down, it's because I'm taking a note.

Project Overview: As you know, the purpose of this study is to explore the coach/athlete leadership relationship and its role on self-worth.

Review of Consent: I have read the consent form to you. By completing the interview, you have given your consent to participate in this research. As a quick note on confidentiality, anything that could identify you (name, date, etc.) will not be included in any presentations or publications on this research. Your identity will be strictly confidential.

If at any point you need me to clarify something, you have a question, or you'd like to stop the interview, please let me know. Are you ready to begin?

C. Interview Questions

1. How is your relationship with your coach?
2. How has this relationship positively or negatively impacted your self-worth?
3. What are the aspects of your relationship with your coach that impacts you the most?
4. How does your perception on self-worth affect your performance?
5. What are some things that can be bettered so the relationship can improve?

Thank you for your time and participation in the current study.