

A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

Loughborough University's *Dr Sophia Jowett*, provides an insight into the power of relational coaching in football

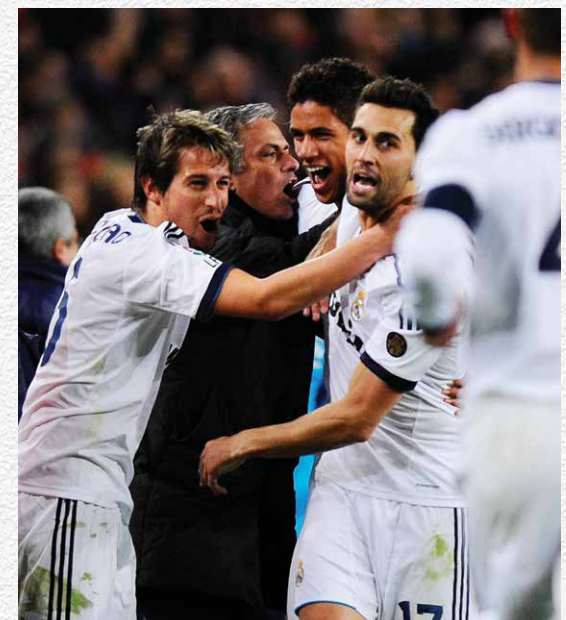
Relational coaching recognises that at the heart of coaching lies the interpersonal relationship formed between the coach and each one of the players in a team. Each relationship provides a unique vehicle that allows the coach to transform their players by openly communicating strengths and weaknesses as well as individual and joint performance goals. The bond or

connection that is formed between coaches and their players allow each player to be more receptive and responsive in the knowledge that their coaches have their best interest at heart. In this article I describe how relational coaching is a sound platform from which players develop their skills, techniques, and tactics, and ultimately successfully cohesive teams.



"To be a technically good coach is one thing, but what gives you the extra effectiveness is if the players love you. And love is not too strong a word."

Patrick Barclay, Jose Mourinho's biographer



The coach-player relationship defined

Over the past 10 years we have studied the content, quality and functions of the coach-athlete relationship. We interviewed hundreds of coaches and players in a range of sports, gathering their thoughts of the relationship, its main ingredients and characteristics, and what is the role and significance of this relationship for skill development and performance. We found that there are four key properties in an effective relationship:

- 1. CLOSENESS** reflects the emotional bond developed between coaches and athletes and is reflected in mutual trust and respect, emotional caring and support, as well as interpersonal liking and appreciation. Emotional closeness was thought of as the bedrock of the sporting partnership
- 2. COMMITMENT** reflects the intentions of coaches and athletes to maintain a bond or a connection that is both close and long-term. This long-term orientation toward the relationship was thought important as it takes time to develop skill and bring about success.
- 3. COMPLEMENTARITY** reflects coaches and athletes' behaviours that are complementary or co-operative. Accordingly, there are two sets of complementary behaviours that coaches and athletes show on the pitch:
 - (a) corresponding refers to the same behaviours that the coach and the athlete are expected to display in training and competition such as responsiveness and openness
 - (b) reciprocal refers to different behaviours that the coach and the athlete are expected to display in training and competition such as, when the coach directs or instructs and the athlete follows or executes instructions in training. These two sets of behaviours were thought to determine the efficient conduct of interactions between coaches and athletes.

"You must create a good leadership with the players, which is an accepted leadership. Not a leadership achieved by power, not achieved by status. Make everybody feel part of a group with a common goal. And I'm one of them." **Jose Mourinho**

- 4. CO-ORIENTATION** reflects coaches and athletes' co-oriented views and highlights the degree to which coaches and athletes have a common ground about the nature of their sporting partnership.

These four relational properties are said to define the quality of the sporting relationship between the coach and each performer in a squad or a team. These properties are known as the 3+1Cs of the coach-athlete relationship. Relationships that possess such properties are said to be harmonious and stable.

Positive effects

Many studies show that harmonious and stable sporting partnerships are linked positively with athletes and coaches' perceptions of motivation, confidence, satisfaction, as well as athletes' perceptions of physical self-concept, team cohesion and collective efficacy. Less



harmonious and stable partnerships associate with eating disorders, interpersonal conflict, burnout, depression and negative affect. Our research has also shown that the quality of the relationship is affected by coaches and athletes' personality, gender, ability level and type of sport.

Collectively, the results of the studies are valuable because: (a) they underline the power of the relationship for athletes and coaches' development and success; and (b) they can inform coaching practice and thus promote the quality of coaching. We all, to some degree, have witnessed coaching that can either make or break sport performers and thus ensuring its quality is paramount.



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Summary

We must not forget that in sport it takes two to bring about change such as skill development and performance success. Neither the coach nor the player can do it alone. Relational coaching underlines the importance of this and emphasises that coaches and players together are responsible for performance success and personal satisfaction.

Relational coaching is reflected in the harmonious and stable relationships coaches and players form and once these are maintained, the journey to skill development and performance success is more likely to be personally fulfilling and satisfying.

Developing the coach-player relationship

Quality of coaching is an active environmental factor that can have significant effects on player's developmental trajectory in sport. One way to enhance the quality of coaching is to promote the development and maintenance of good coach-player relationships. COMPASS is a communication model that highlights key strategies that coaches and athletes use or can use to develop more effective coach-player relationships:

- **Conflict management** – reflects efforts to identify, discuss, resolve and monitor potential areas of disagreement or misunderstanding before they escalate
- **Openness** – includes efforts to engage in open lines of communication
- **Motivation** – highlights efforts from both parties to make a partnership that is rewarding, active, ambitious, and energetic
- **Preventative** – underlines efforts to discuss expectations, rules, roles and what should happen if these are not met
- **Assurance** – includes showing one's commitment to the relationship (making sacrifices that will assist the relationship to be functional and successful)
- **Support** – is reflected in helping one another (the coach or athlete) through difficult times
- **Social networks** – the relationship built between the coach and the player is not disconnected from other relationships and people; subsequently, creating opportunities to develop strong bonds with others is paramount to the success of the relationship.

