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Olympic medallists' perspective of the althlete–coach relationship

S. Jowett [a,*], I.M. Cockerill [b]

[a] *School of Health, Staffordshire University, Leek Road, Stoke-on-Trent ST4 2DF, UK*
[b] *University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK*

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Abstract

Objectives: To investigate the nature and significance of the athlete–coach relationship within the context of the interpersonal constructs of Closeness, Co-orientation, and Complementarity (three Cs).

Method: Participants were 12 Olympic medallists (three females and nine males). Each participant had achieved at least one medal in the Olympic Games held between 1968 and 1988. An interview schedule was utilised that prompted former athletes' responses to open-ended questions about their athletic relationship with their coach.

Results: Feelings of Closeness, such as trust and respect, thoughts of Co-orientation, such as common goals, as well as complementary roles and tasks, marked the athletic relationships of the Olympic medallists. Despite the prevalence of the positive relational aspects, negative relational aspects, such as lack of emotional closeness and complementary resources, also emerged. The impact of the athlete–coach relationship on the success achieved became evident through the former athletes' narratives and recollections.

Conclusion: The nature of the athlete–coach relationship has an important role to play in the athlete's development both as a performer and as a person. It is recommended that coach education programmes provide information that will assist coaches to develop effective relationships with their athletes.

Keywords: Olympic level athletes; Athlete–coach relationship; Closeness; Co-orientation; Complementarity

Introduction

Many interpersonal relationships are formed in sport, exercise, and physical education settings. Despite the apparently significant role that these interpersonal relationships play in the lives of

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44-1782-294292; fax: +44-1782-294321.
E-mail address: s.jowett@staffs.ac.uk (S. Jowett).

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sport performers, the existing knowledge and understanding of interpersonal relationships in sport and other areas of physical activity have remained constrained at both the theoretical and empirical level (Coppel, 1995; Wylleman, 2000; Wylleman, Carpenter, Weiss, & Ewing, 1999). An interpersonal relationship specific and important to sport psychology is that between the athlete and the coach. The athlete–coach relationship is fundamental in the process of coaching because its nature is likely to determine the athlete's satisfaction, self-esteem and performance accomplishments (Jowett & Meek, 2000a,b; Lyle, 1999; Vealey, Armstrong, Comar, & Greenleaf, 1998).

Several qualitative studies have illustrated the significance and quality of the athlete–coach relationship. Kalinowski (1985), following in-depth interviews with 21 Olympic swimmers, concluded, in referring specifically to coaches and parents, that "no one can become an Olympic-calibre swimmer without the direct support, instruction, and otherwise, of many people" (p. 140). Furthermore, Hemery's (1986) work referred to the athlete–coach relationship through the experiences of some of the greatest sport achievers. For example, Steve Cram described his relationship with coach Jimmy Hedley as "being supportive… it goes beyond an athlete–coach relationship. He's a friend of the family and another sort of father figure". The heptathlete Glynis Nunn, coached by John Daly, similarly stated that her relationship with her coach was underlined by understanding, 'just as in a father–daughter relationship or in marriage'. More recently, Bloom, Durant-Bush, Schinke, and Salmela (1998) explained that often coaches' relationships with athletes are reciprocal, trusting, genuine, and helping in nature and go beyond merely teaching and instructing skills, techniques and tactics. Similarly, Poczwardowski, Barott, and Henschen (2000) found that the athlete–coach relationship was underlined by respect, belief in, knowledge of, and contribution to the other's goals, needs, and wants. Specifically, the element of care on the part of the coach was found to be essential in the relationship.

Although evidence suggests that the athlete–coach relationship is instrumental in an athlete's development, there is also evidence to suggest that it can become a source of stress and distraction, especially for the athlete. A study by Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, and Peterson (1999) revealed that athletes' preparation leading up to the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta was affected by issues such as lack of trust, support, communication, and respect among coaches and athletes who operated at the highest level of sport. Moreover Balague (1999) explained that the identity of elite female athletes in gymnastics was often misunderstood by coaches and one such athlete reported "People see me as a pair of legs and think that this is all that I am. I need a coach who will see me as a whole person" (p. 93). Similarly Ryan (1996) found that coaches of elite young gymnasts and figure skaters often betray the trust and respect deemed to be implicit in the athlete–coach relationship. Coaches who aim to provide their athletes with the service they deserve should not only concentrate on developing the athlete as a performer, but also as a person (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Ryan, 1996). Evidently, the athlete–coach relationship in sport is too significant to neglect and its significance may stretch beyond the confines of sport.

The dynamics involved between athletes and their coaches have been commonly studied through the use of either the Multidimensional Model of Leadership in Sport (Chelladurai, 1993) or the Mediational Model of the Coach–Player Relationship (Smoll, Smith, Curtis, & Hunt, 1978). Although, these models have generated information that is valuable in assisting coaches' relating with athletes, their scope has recently been criticised as limited (Bloom, Durant-Bush, & Salmela, 1997; Jowett, 2001; Lyle, 1999). Specifically, Bloom et al. (1997) explained that these models are limited because coaching is not something that coaches simply 'do'.

Vanden Auweele and Rzewnicki (2000) stated that relationship research in sport will benefit if sport psychology researchers consider "theories, concepts and methodologies from other areas of psychology" (p. 576). In this light, Jowett and colleagues (Jowett, 2001; Jowett & Meek, 2000b) recently proposed an alternative conceptual model of the athlete–coach relationship that is based on Kelley et al.'s (1983) definition of interpersonal relationships. Kelley et al. defined a dyadic relationship as the situation in which t*wo people's behaviours, emotions, and thoughts are mutually and causally interdependent*. This conception of relationship not only identifies the basic constituents of human relationships, but also their interrelations. Subsequently, three interpersonal constructs, namely Complementarity (Kiesler, 1997), Closeness (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), and Co-orientation (Newcomb, 1953), were selected from the interpersonal relationship and behaviour literatures in order to operationalise the basic constituents of the athlete–coach relationship (Jowett & Meek, 2000a,b).

The conceptual and operational frameworks of the athlete–coach relationship have been described in detail elsewhere (Jowett, 2001; Jowett & Meek, 2000b), so only a very basic summary of the operational nature of the constructs follows. Closeness reflects the emotional tone that coaches and athletes experience and express in describing their athletic relationships. Coaches and athletes descriptions of their relationship in terms of interpersonal liking, trust, and respect indicate the level and nature of Closeness. Co-orientation occurs when relationship members have established a common frame of reference, namely shared goals, beliefs, values, and expectations. Open channels of communication allow coaches and athletes to share each other's experiences, beliefs, values, thoughts, and worries and, in turn, facilitate the development of Co-orientation. Complementarity refers to the type of interaction that the coach and the athlete engage in, as well as to motivations and appropriate resources for developing an athletic relationship. Naturally, Complementarity of resources has a role to play in the formation and maintenance of that relationship. For example, the coach provides competencies that the athlete often does not possess, but that are needed to improve performance. In a complementary way, coaches need athletes to apply their competencies in the pursuit of excellence. Because co-operation is a principal complementary property in the athlete–coach relationship, complementarity reflects the type of interaction that the coach and athlete perceive as co-operative. Lack of emotional closeness, co-oriented views and complementary acts of interaction in the athlete–coach relationship give rise to the diametrically opposite relational aspects of negative closeness, dis-orientation, and non-complementarity.

The positive and negative relational aspects of Closeness, Co-orientation, and Complementarity (three Cs) have been employed in research to examine the nature of typical and atypical dyadic athlete–coach relationships[1] in individual sports. For example, Jowett and Meek (2000b) explored an *atypical* relationship type, namely, the athlete–coach relationship between married couples. Results revealed that the nature of the athlete–coach relationship was underlined by a close bond (largely due to the marital relationship), which facilitated the formulation of co-oriented views and complementary acts of interaction in training. In addition, it was found that the nature of the 'working relationship' (Jowett & Meek, 2000b, p. 172) promoted stability, harmony and performance accomplishments. Another study by Jowett and Meek (2000a) examined a single *typical*

[1] The typical dyadic coach–athlete relationship refers to the coach and athlete who are not related in any way other than their relationship as a coach and athlete, whereas the atypical relationship is generally a dual role relationship in which the coach and athlete are also related through familial, marital or educational ties (Jowett, 2001).

dyadic relationship where the coach and athlete were not related in any way other than through their athlete–coach relationship. Results indicated that Closeness, Co-orientation and Complementarity and their corresponding negative relational aspects, marked the nature of the relationship. More specifically, it was found that negative closeness (distrust), dis-orientation (incongruent goals) and non-complementary transactions (power struggles) compromised the quality of the relationship and its effectiveness (Jowett & Meek, 2000a). Both studies have confirmed the existence of the interpersonal constructs, their quality (positive and negative aspects) and quantity (frequency).

Vergeer (2000) stated that qualitative approaches might provide incisive data of the quality of interpersonal relationships. She explained that qualitative research methods could be used not only in the early stages of research as a form of exploratory or preliminary exposition of the phenomenon, but also as a way of generating knowledge in its own right. Thus, the main purpose of the study was to investigate, by employing a qualitative research design, the perceptions of 12 former, highly accomplished athletes in order to explore: (a) the nature of the relationship with their coach with regard to the aforementioned interpersonal constructs of Closeness, Co-orientation, and Complementarity (including both positive and negative aspects); (b) the associations between the constructs within the relationship; and (c) the role and significance of the relationship in reaching top-level performance.

Method

Participants

Twelve former athletes who had achieved major successes agreed to participate in the study. The participants were selected on the criteria that they had achieved an Olympic medal, had a typical athletic relationship with their coach, and were able to communicate comfortably in either English or Greek. Each participant had achieved at least one medal in the Olympic Games held between 1968 and 1988. Three of the 12 participants were females with a mean age of 43 years (SD = 4) and nine were males with a mean age of 55 years (SD = 9.76). The sports in which they had won Olympic medals were gymnastics, sailing, swimming, track and field athletics, and wrestling, representing Brazil (1), Greece (3), Estonia (1), Latvia (1), Mexico (2), Russia (1), Spain (1), and the USA (2). Simonton (1999) has supported the psychological study of ‘notable athletes’ (p. 426) because of their significance and distinctiveness. This study resorted to a ‘significant sample’ (Simonton, 1999, p. 426) of participants because their Olympic successes set them apart from less successful athletes. Moreover, this sample had the opportunity to reflect on their athletic experiences and, hence, provide insightful answers about the nature of effective athlete–coach relationships. At the time of the study, four of the participants coached in their own countries or abroad. To guarantee anonymity, the letter A for athlete and the numbers 1–12 were used to identify each participant.

Instrument

An interview schedule that prompted athletes’ responses to open-ended questions about their interpersonal relationship with their coach was chosen as the methodology for this study. It was

devised based on methodology sources (Patton, 1990), interpersonal relationship and behaviour literatures, the authors' experience in working with elite athletes, and insights gained from previous studies. The participants were asked five open-ended questions in order to determine the nature and significance of their athlete–coach relationship (see Appendix A). The interviews consisted of three parts. A brief introduction was used to gather demographic details and to establish rapport with the athletes. During this part, participants were asked to consider the relationship with the coach that led them to achieve Olympic success. The second part of the interview consisted of the five open-ended questions, which were asked in the same sequence and wording with probes used as required. Each interview concluded by asking participants whether there were further issues that they wished to add relevant to the relationship with their coach.

Procedure

The opportunity to interview the Olympians arose at an International Congress where they were approached by the first author and invited to participate in the study. After explanation of the aims and background of the study, interviews were arranged. The interviews ranged in duration between 30 and 40 min and were audiotaped with the participants' consent. Interviews were conducted in English, apart from those interviews that involved Greek participants—they were interviewed in Greek. Time constraints prevented three of the selected participants from taking part in the interviews; thus, their responses were supplied in a written format by post, a week following the completion of the Congress. The interviews (oral and written) were later transcribed verbatim into A4 single-spaced text.

Data analysis

Content analysis (Weber, 1990) was used as a systematic method for exploring the content of the obtained data. Two main parts were included in the analysis: (a) categorisation of themes and (b) coder interpretations.

Categorisation of themes

The raw data units were assigned to a priori categories of the three Cs—Closeness, Co-orientation, and Complementarity (including positive and negative aspects). Each raw data unit referred to a quote which, in turn, represented "a statement made by the subject which was self-definable and self-delimiting in the expression of a single, recognisable aspect of the subject's experience" (Cloonan, 1971, p. 117). A hierarchy of responses, moving from specific (raw data units) to general levels (first-order themes, second-order themes, and general categories) was then established. The hierarchical organisation of the raw data units into higher order themes was conducted in order to identify common themes of greater abstraction. Although the level of abstraction varied, quotations revealed that all levels represented relational aspects, positive or negative, relevant to the constructs of Closeness, Co-orientation and Complementarity (three Cs). The hierarchical organisation of the data exposed the complexity of the constructs in relation to the participants' experiences (Jowett, 2001; Jowett & Meek, 2000b).

It became evident from the initial categorisation of the raw data units into the three Cs that associations between the three constructs were occurring. According to Jowett and Meek (2000b),

these associations should not be ignored because they indicate the interdependent nature of Closeness (feelings), Co-orientation (cognitions), and Complementarity (behaviours). Three categories were formed to reflect the associations between Closeness/Co-orientation, Co-orientation/Complementarity, and Complementarity/Closeness. Consequently, raw data units (i.e. statements) that contained elements of, for example, Closeness and Co-orientation were placed under the Closeness/Co-orientation category. An example of a positive interaction between Closeness and Co-orientation is demonstrated by the following, 'She taught me [Co-orientation] what commitment [Closeness] means'. An example of a negative interaction between Closeness and Complementarity would be, 'Feelings of frustration [negative closeness] was a regular occurrence, and it was the result of my coach's behaviour [non-complementarity]'.

Frequency analysis was utilised to quantify, in percentages, the responses of participants who cited a theme within each of the second-order themes and general categories. Quantification of the data aimed to condense the results, to make them easily comprehensible, and to allow the emergence of patterns (Mays & Pope, 1995). Table 1 provides a summary of the classification system for all responses obtained from the participants.

Coder interpretations

The face validity between the thematic categories and the constructs that they represented, as well as inter-coder consistency of interpretation (Krippendorff, 1980; Guba, 1981), were determined by inter-coder agreement. Thus, in an effort to establish face validity and consistency of the data categorisation, the second author was provided with the complete classification system developed by the first author in order to address the following question: 'Do the levels of abstraction accurately represent the raw data units?' A careful review of the classification system yielded an average percentage agreement of 83% (90% for Closeness, 92% for Complementarity, and 68% for Co-orientation). The acceptable level of agreement was set at 75%. The same level of

Table 1
A summary of classified responses

Construct	Thematic responses	*n*	%
Closeness	Athletic responses	61	32.3
Negative Closeness	Athletic responses	5	2.6
	Total	66	34.9
	Interactions	5	20
Co-orientation	Athletic responses	29	15.3
Disorientation	Athletic responses	4	2.1
	Total	33	17.4
	Interactions	11	44
Complementarity	Athletic responses	47	24.9
Non-Complementarity	Athletic responses	13	6.9
	Total	60	31.8
	Interactions	9	36
	Unclassified	30	15.9
Overall total (inc unclassified)		189	100

$N = 12$.

agreement has been used in other studies (e.g. see Jowett & Meek, 2000b). The discrepancy observed concerning Co-orientation was reviewed by restudying the transcripts and discussing disputed areas. This procedure assisted in settling interpretative disputes and, thus, ensuring trustworthy data.

Results and discussion

Notwithstanding the general nature of the interview schedule used, the nature of the participants' relationship with their coaches was easily discernible in relation to the three constructs of Closeness, Co-orientation and Complementarity. Both positive (72.5%) and negative (11.6%) relational aspects were reported. Almost 16% (15.9%) of the data were unclassifiable (i.e. irrelevant utterances). This section focuses on the former athletes' perceptions and experiences of the athletic relationship with their coaches. This information is presented in a manner that corresponds to the three key constructs (three Cs).

Closeness

From the participants' responses to the five questions, a total of 66 (34.3%) raw data units were identified and ascribed to the Closeness component of the participants' relationship with their coach. Of the 66 statements obtained, 61 (32.3%) were positively framed and five (2.6%) were negatively framed (Table 1). Table 2 presents the higher order themes by Closeness (only

Table 2
Sample raw data (RD) related to closeness (positively framed quotes)

Closeness	Raw data
Personal feelings	
Intimacy	She was very close to all of us
	We remained close after I ended my career
Trust	I trusted his judgement
	He was honest
Liking	He has been a very special person for me
	I still get together with my dearest coach
Generic feelings	
Respect	I credit my coach
	Appreciation for coach was highly rated
	My respect for him was uppermost
	I felt appreciated by him
Belief	Coach told me I was able to achieve goals
	He was interested in the person
Commitment	She taught me what commitment means
	Coach dedicated time and effort to get to know the athlete and explore our abilities

Note. $N = 9$; RD = 15.6% (personal feelings); RD = 16.7% (generic feelings); RD = 32.3%.

positive aspects). The majority of the athletes ($n = 9$) explained the significance of the coach in affective terms such as liking, trust, intimacy, respect, belief in one another and commitment, all of which were combined to form the first-order themes. The second-order themes included *generic* and *personal feelings* and were cited almost equally frequently by the participants. The second-order theme of generic feelings included affective ties such as respect, belief, and commitment. These feelings appear to be influential in the development and effectiveness of the coach–athlete relationship (Bloom et al., 1998; Jowett & Meek, 2000a,b; Poczwardowski et al., 2000). The second-order theme of personal feelings (e.g. intimacy, trust and liking) may be less influential for the effectiveness of the 'working' coach–athlete relationship, nevertheless important for the establishment of a more personal relationship (Hemery, 1986; Jowett & Meek, 2000a; Lyle, 1999). Some athletes viewed their coach as a close friend or a mentor, others as a father or mother figure. Consequently, feelings such as intimacy, trust, and liking may represent elements of an interpersonal relationship that is more personal as in a close friendship.

The majority of the participants described their relationship with strong emotional accounts. The following example illustrates the extent to which the relationship was perceived and recalled in the following way by (A3),

> My coach was a father figure. My respect for him was uppermost…. We remained close after I ended my career in swimming until he died….I know his relationships with other teammates was similar and with others not as close as mine.

Another participant (A6) explained that two relationships developed and existed simultaneously with his coach. One relationship was the 'human relationship' and the other was the 'training relationship'. It was further explained that the human relationship was no different from a friendship and it was underlined by 'trust' and 'respect', whereas the training relationship was strengthened by the coach's 'guidance'. He continued,

> These relationships, like all the others we develop, must grow and alongside them we grow and improve and so these relationships need to allow us to evolve. The coach–athlete relationship is a unique relationship, which develops specifically during the long, lasting hours of training.

Here, the 'human relationship' may be associated with what Bloom et al. (1998) and others (Hemery, 1986; Lyle, 1999) have referred to as the personal and humanistic side of coaching. In interpersonal terms, the humanistic side of coaching may be associated with the display of a deep interest in the welfare and development of the athlete on the part of the coach. This relationship resembles the one that Rogers (1967) advocated as essential in fostering personal development and 'self-actualisation' (p. 35). Rogers (1967) explained that interpersonal relationships, in order to be effective, require qualities such as liking, respecting, appreciating, as well as understanding and accepting. According to Rogers (1967), such relationships create a psychological climate that is self-directing, self-responsible, more creative, more readily adaptable to new problems, more co-operative and less anxious.

The emotional bonding with the coach was also manifested in the athletes' acknowledgements. In fact, one participant reported that one of her Olympic medals was offered to the coach as a token of appreciation. Belief in and commitment to each other and to the relationship as a whole

were the two first-order themes most frequently cited. Most participants explained and illustrated the importance of these emerging themes. For example, it was stated by (A2),

> Our coach–athlete relationship was different. I knew and could see it from the way the coach treated the other swimmers in the team. One day I asked my coach why he is different towards me. He said that 'your goals are different from the other swimmers and so you have to work longer and harder'. I asked him this question again long after I finished my swimming career and he said that he believed in my abilities and knew that I would reach as high as I have done.

Emotional closeness as a salient aspect of the coach–athlete relationship appears to be consistent with evidence in the sport psychology literature (Jowett & Meek, 2000a,b; Poczwardowski et al., 2000; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). Vernacchia (1995) has vividly stated that "coaches become very attached to their athletes and commit great emotional investments of care and concern for the welfare of their athletes" (p. 363). The present data also indicate that athletes, too, develop feelings for their coaches. Thus, mutual feelings, both general and personal, are important in positive and effective relationships.

Negative closeness was reported, but the extent to which negative closeness was experienced by the former champions was particularly small (2.6%). It is well known that people often tend to under-report negative experiences that include undesirable, sensitive, and/or threatening information (see Pope, 1997). Nevertheless, the negative closeness or absence of emotional closeness reported by two participants appeared to have had negative consequences for these athletes. For instance, one of them, (A11) said,

> His coaching style was pretty much 'do as you like'…. Coach was only interested about his own personal affairs…. I felt that he could not provide me with what I needed and, as a result, I started to feel frustrated and angry to the point that I could no longer perform well…. I believe that the coach and athlete need to be close and they need to find a formula of co-operating that works for both of them… then trust will develop [alongside] belief in each other's abilities. There is no doubt in my mind that the athlete should believe in his coach and be able to say 'this is the coach that can make me win an Olympic medal'.

In a similar way, another participant (A12) stated,

> I also have experienced the negative side of working with a coach who can't care less for you… [He] did not explicitly express an interest in me personally, nor in my training sessions, because I suppose he had so many other activities. The worst of all was that I felt being used by him.

These excerpts illustrate an athlete's need and desire to be, as one athlete put it, 'under the wings' of a coach who is not only competent to provide instructions, but also competent to communicate feelings such as consideration, warmth, care and interest (cf. Poczwardowski et al., 2000; Sarason et al., 1990). Carron and Bennett (1977) found that the need for inclusion, to be close with and part of the other in the dyadic athletic relationship was the only dimension that differentiated compatible from incompatible coach–athlete dyads.

Co-orientation

From the participants' responses to the five questions, only a small portion of the overall data was identified with the construct of Co-orientation. Raw data units (33; 17.4%) from eight participants were classified under the construct of Co-orientation (Table 1). More specifically, of the 33 statements, 29 were positively framed (15.3%) and four (2.1%) were negatively framed. Table 3 presents the higher order themes by Co-orientation (only positive aspects). For the positively framed statements, information exchange, common goals and acceptance combined led to the second-order themes of *shared knowledge* and *understanding*. Majority of the participants referred to the important role that interpersonal communication had to play in the relationship with their coach, regardless of its content. Eight of the participants reported that they were frequently engaged with their coaches in discussions about issues, such as performance goals, training and life in general. One participant summed up his view by saying, "The most important issues for the coach are to listen, to look, and to understand the performer; in addition, talk to and with the performer" (A10).

The female participants reported that they did not engage in 'formal discussions' with their coaches. However, participants A2 and A5 stated that their involvement with their coach was an experience that communicated more than just how to perform a skill. For example, their coaches taught them how to deal with an audience, the sport authorities, the press and media, even how to apply make-up, and dress for specific competitive events. One of them (A5) stated,

> I used to spend a lot of time in the company of my coach and teammates. I remember we used to eat, travel, train and sometimes study together…. My coach knew me even better at that time than my family and close friends…. One of her [coach] many qualities was that she made us feel that she understood us, and she must have done, because she knew all of us like an open book.

Table 3
Sample raw data (RD) related to co-orientation (positively framed quotes)

Co-orientation	Raw data
Shared knowledge	
Information exchange	My coach taught me so many things besides gymnastics
	We negotiated and communicated
	She knew me even better at that time than my family and close friends
	We knew each other well
	We talked not only about swimming
Shared understanding	
Common goals	We had common goals
	We both worked towards set goals
Influence	I used to look at him in the eyes to see his acceptance and satisfaction
	I followed his instructions without question
	My career was in his hand—no problem

Note. $N = 8$; RD = 9.5% (shared knowledge); RD = 5.8% (shared understanding); RD = 15.3%.

A somewhat different picture emerged from the responses of the male participants. For example, one male participant said that, "the positive points of our partnership were that we negotiated and communicated effectively and in that way we set joint goals. We knew exactly what we wanted to achieve and what we needed to do in order to achieve these goals" (A8). Another explained, "I did not communicate or agree to any great extent with my coach, I worked and accepted his decisions…. It [relationship] became eventually successful because we had a common goal in which we both invested and believed in" (A10). These excerpts imply that communication is associated with common goals and performance-oriented issues.

It becomes evident that the development of a shared knowledge and understanding was the result of communicative transactions that included goal setting, talks, negotiations, and/or social influence. These transactions took place at training sessions, training camps and while travelling to competitions. The majority of participants felt that the knowledge acquired from communicating with one another aimed to increase performance achievement. Moreover, former athletes felt that their coaches' knowledge and understanding enabled them to respond sensitively and appropriately to their needs, aspirations, and problems.

These results are in line with Poczwardowski et al.'s (2000) findings that knowledge of, and contribution to, the other relationship member's (coach or athlete) goals and needs play a part in the development of superior athletic groups. Also, Gould et al. (1999) have reported that effective communication between coaches and their athletes is a significant factor that contributes to the team's success. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that effective communication prevents the creation of incompatibility, dissatisfaction, and underachievement in the athletic relationship (Carron & Bennett, 1977; Jowett & Meek, 2000b).

Finally, Bandura's (1986) model on self-efficacy supports the notion that people's sense of efficacy reflects the information they receive from their environments. Thus, it could be said that coaches and athletes who are co-oriented (i.e. have shared knowledge and understanding) are more likely to communicate effectively and appropriately. Consequently, effective communication, such as performance feedback and general information may impact on athletes' increased sense of competence. It is thus essential that coaches strive towards developing Co-orientation through sustained effective communicative transactions.

Complementarity

From the participants' responses to the five questions, a total of 60 (31.8%) raw data units was identified and ascribed to the construct of complementarity (Table 1). Specifically, 47 (24.9%) were positively framed statements and the remainder (13; 6.9%) were negatively framed. Table 4 presents the higher order themes by Complementarity (only positive aspects). The first-order themes of roles and tasks, as well as helping transactions, led to the second-order themes of *co-operative behaviours* (roles and tasks) and *helping transactions* (support). All 12 Olympians referred to the importance of 'hard work on both sides' and 'co-operation and responsiveness'. Complementary roles, and a sense that both coach and athlete worked equally hard in achieving improved performance, were the most frequently cited themes.

Samples of the participants statements follow: "my role as an athlete was to follow my coach's instructions and my coach's role was to provide me with effective instructions and make me feel good and positive" (A2); " I was happy with the degree of co-operation my coach allowed. It

Table 4
Sample raw data (RD) related to complementarity (positively framed quotes)

Complementarity	Raw data
Reciprocal behaviour	
Roles and tasks	Clearly defined roles between coaches and athlete may help toward achieving goals. It may sound naïve but it worked for me
	Hard work and co-operation
	I followed coach's instructions and coach provided me with the positive instructions
	He had a way to make me work hard—we worked together at the pool
	She could be very sweet but she could also be very hard on us, aggressive and demand
	We worked hard every single day
	I did the best I could and so did he
	I needed his experience in order to progress
Helping transactions	
Support	My coach was very encouraging and he was pushing me even when I could not do try any harder or do better
	My coach was very supportive
	He supported and inspired me
	I had an inner desire to know that…he will support me…and he never let me down

Note. $N = 12$; RD = 20.9% (roles and tasks); RD = 4% (helping transactions); RD = 24.9%.

was a well balanced co-operation, productive and, ultimately, brought a much sought success" (A4); "Without the coach's efforts, I could not have achieved results, it would have been impossible to get good results without the coach's support and guidance" (A6); "We worked hard every single day and every month, I remember we had meetings in order to analyse the performance and results" and he continued "for me the coach is a skilful, knowledgeable and smart teacher and the performer is an ambitious pupil" (A7); "A good coach has got to have a thorough technical knowledge of the sport and be able to convey that knowledge so that the athlete can use it to become a competent performer" (A12).

Majority of the participants reported that the complementary roles and tasks manifested in the sport arenas (e.g. track, mat, gym, pool) enabled them to channel all their efforts towards accomplishing the goals set. This finding is consistent with research that indicates that goals in relationships determine behaviours (Dryer & Horowitz, 1997; Jowett & Meek, 2000a,b). In addition, participants felt that a successful coach is one who can provide technical instruction in a manner that inspires and nurtures an athlete. Thus, it appears that coaches who are resourceful and caring are more likely to be perceived by their athletes as a successful coach.

In contrast, the accounts of two participants indicated that a perceived lack of provision of adequate technical instruction in a supporting and inspiring way could be detrimental to the athlete's psychological and physical well being. For example, A4 stated,

> At times I felt that I knew much more than the coach did about the sport… I felt that the training plan was not always the best. A coach must always reassure the athlete that he and

> his plans are right. So there were times where I could sense his weaknesses… he was hesitant, indecisive, doubtful and as a result I did not feel positive around him.

In addition, A11 expressed the following:

> I had a ten-year athletic relationship with coach. In the beginning, we both worked well and got on well… the last three years our relationship worsened and became very typical. I felt he could not provide me with what I needed and wanted. He could not understand me and as a result I found the training sessions insufficient and so I supplemented my training with what I felt appropriate and necessary…. Reaching the top was the result of my own hard work and perseverance. I only had a very little assistance from my coach…. Feelings of frustration was a regular occurrence, and it was the result of my coach's behaviour.

Both quotes indicate the ineffectiveness of interpersonal relationships when resources such as the coach's knowledge, planning, and support are perceived as inadequate, in other words, non-complementary to the athlete's needs (cf. Lyle, 1999; Poczwardowski et al., 2000; Winch, 1958). Under such conditions not only does the quality of the coach–athlete relationship suffer, but so do the athletes' sport performance and psychological well-being; the latter was reflected in feeling frustrated, angry, and dissatisfied. Jowett and Meek (2000a) found that non-complementary transactions, such as opposed behaviours (e.g. power struggles, unequal needs) and ineffective support (i.e. lack of support) are inversely related to the nature of the relationship in as much as to dissolute an athletic partnership that once produced top-level performances. These preliminary findings indicate that complementary roles, tasks, and support appear to be related to functional athletic relationships, whereas non-complementary interactions appear to be related with dysfunctional athletic dyads or groups.

Associations

Table 5 illustrates associations between the three interpersonal constructs (three Cs) in the participants' accounts. A total of 25 associations reflecting the raw data units were identified of which four (16%) were negative, and the remaining 21 (84%) were positive. All 25 units were categorised under the three interaction categories of Closeness/Co-orientation (5; 20%) Co-orientation/Complementarity (11; 44%), and Complementarity/Closeness (9; 36%).

The statements recorded in the association category between *Co-orientation* and *Complementarity* have supported the constructs' interrelations. Good (1991) has stated "increasing the amount of communication does increase the amount of co-operation" (p. 233); therefore, open channels of communication, such as informal or formal conversations, talks and goal setting, lead to the development of Co-orientation between the coach and athlete which, in turn, facilitate co-operative (complementary) acts of interaction. In contrast, if lack of communication was experienced between a coach and an athlete, the development of Co-orientation and, in turn, the maintenance of Complementarity (co-operative acts of interaction) would have been doubtful. Specifically, Jowett and Meek (2000a) have shown that lack of Co-orientation (i.e. disorientation) is associated with unequal needs and incompatible goals.

The associations between *Closeness* and *Co-orientation*, although not extensive, revealed a

Table 5
Data (RD) and interaction effects between the constructs as revealed by the Olympic medallists

Closeness/Co-orientation (N = 5, RD = 20%)	Co-orientation/Complementarity (N = 8, RD = 44%)	Complementarity/Closeness (N = 7, RD = 36%)
She was a friend that I could talk to. We used to talk about life, school and of course about sport,…. She taught me what commitment means (A5)	She knew how to encourage me during demanding training sessions (A5)	*I did not trust my coach entirely because he was at times uncertain (A4)*
	We were aware of what we needed to achieve (A5)	
He believed in my abilities because he knew that I could reach high (A2)	Our relationship was not ideal but we communicated well and so worked well (A7)	*I did not appreciate his efforts because he was hesitant, indecisive, doubtful and as a result I did not feel positive around him (A4)*
My respect for him was uppermost because of his knowledge (A3)	He knew my weaknesses and developed them to strengths (A8)	There was mutual like, respect, and trust all these contributed in the success we both achieved (A9)
I knew that I can count on him (A1)		
We had a mutual target and that kept us together (A8)	Our co-operation to achieve those goals could had been better in many respects (A8)	I felt committed to him because I respected his efforts during training (A10)
		These feelings [frustration] was the result of my coach's behaviour (A11)
	It became eventually successful because we had a common goal (A10)	The athlete requires from the coach to be sincere only then he can develop and progress himself further (A12)
	He could not understand me and as a result I found the training sessions insufficient and so I supplemented my training with what I felt appropriate and necessary (A11)	*He did not explicitly express an interest in me personally nor in my training sessions (A12)*
	To know that coach can work hard with and for me (A12)	Mutual confidence is necessary ingredient of a successful co-operation: Coach is the right right person to help athlete only when the athlete believes that the coach can help him (A2)
	To agree on the goals and work together in achieving them (A12)	
	Coach told me I was able to achieve my goals through hard work (A3)	Although my career was in his hand, I had no problem with that (A3)

Note: in italics samples of negatively framed quotes.

possible link between the two constructs. Athletes' explained that Closeness had enabled them to communicate freely about a variety of issues. There is indeed evidence to suggest that people disclose more information when they trust, or feel close to each other (Argyle, 1994; Jowett & Meek, 2000a,b; Naegele, 1958). There is also experimental and anecdotal evidence to support the view that interpersonal liking leads to disclosure (e.g. Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). Thus, athletes are more likely to reveal themselves to coaches whom they like, respect, believe and trust.

Associations between *Closeness* and *Complementarity* also emerged. In this category, it was revealed that Closeness is associated with complementary acts. For example, the closer the athletes and coaches feel, the more the opportunities occur for the coach to provide support, to spend time and effort and to respond to athletes' needs and wishes. In a similar vein, the closer athletes and coaches feel towards one another, the more the opportunities for the athlete to respond positively to their coach's actions and efforts. According to Birtchell (1993), complementary behaviours serve as a 'true' reflection and proof of positive interpersonal feelings. Conversely, the absence of complementary behaviours between the coach and athlete reflects negative feelings such as isolation, opposition, jealousy, and envy (see e.g. Jowett & Meek, 2000a). In summary, the associations between the three Cs provide evidence of the interdependent nature of coaches and athletes' Closeness (feelings), Co-orientation (cognitions), and Complementarity (behaviours).

General discussion

The focus of this investigation was to explore the nature of an elite and typical coach–athlete relationship type within the context of three interpersonal constructs of Closeness, Co-orientation and Complementarity (three Cs). Content analysis of the data obtained from 12 Olympians revealed: (a) the nature of this athletic relationship with respect to the three Cs; (b) the associations of the three Cs within this relationship; and (c) the role and significance of the coach–athlete relationship in reaching top-level performance. Overall, it was revealed that even at the elite level of competitive sport, the interpersonal relationship between coach and athlete is an important factor that contributes to the athlete's development. The stereotypical perception that the athletic relationship formed between coaches and their athletes at the elite level is impersonal, authoritarian, and dependent upon competition success was not supported. Indeed, there is an accumulation of evidence that suggests that coaches and athletes develop athletic relationships that are athlete-centred (Bloom et al., 1998; Gould et al., 1999; Hemery, 1986; Jowett & Meek, 2000a,b; Lyle, 1999; Poczwardowski et al., 2000). More specifically, such relationships are underlined by mutual respect, trust, care, concern, support, open communication, shared knowledge and understanding, as well as clear, corresponding roles and tasks.

The interviews also uncovered potential associations between the three Cs; however, direction of causality or what is the most influential direction between the constructs was not discerned. For example, does complementarity lead to or cause Closeness, or does Closeness lead to or cause complementarity? Jowett (2001) suggested that research into the causal relationships of the three constructs, as well as antecedents and consequences of the coach–athlete relationship, is particularly interesting for two main reasons. First, it will unveil the complexity of dyadic relationships, and second, it will indicate the manner and extent to which the constructs are interrelated. There is a greater opportunity to understand the athlete–coach relationship if its underlying processes

are captured and subsequently explained. This information could be particularly useful for intervention and relationship-enhancement programmes.

It has been acknowledged that significant samples (i.e. collections of participants who are distinguished in some way) have greatly enriched psychological science (Simonton, 1999). Indeed, this methodological approach has become evident in sport psychology (e.g. Gould et al., 1999; Kalinowski, 1985). Simonton (1999) stated that one of the reasons for employing significant samples in research can be found in the functions they serve to 'admirers' (p. 435). In sport, Olympic champions serve as role models to the younger generation of athletes. Therefore, in this study, the sample employed may function as a model of what coaches and athletes must do to form effective interpersonal relationships.

The implications of this study underline the importance of incorporating social skills in coach education programmes. With the emergence of evidence (Jowett & Meek, 2000b; Maniar, Curry, Sommers-Flanagan, & Walsh, 2001) that suggests that athletes are more likely to seek support and advice from people whom they feel close to, the formation of reliable athlete–coach relationships becomes paramount. Thus, coach education programmes should not focus exclusively on providing information that centres on the technical, strategical, and tactical skills, but also providing coaches with information that would assist them to develop effective relationships with their athletes. Ultimately, the ability of coaches to develop effective relationships with their athletes could have an impact on athletes well being, and in turn performance accomplishments.

Several limitations of this study warrant discussion. First, the investigation employed a qualitative research design and responses obtained by utilising two different sources (a) one-to-one interviews, and (b) written accounts. Although, the written responses were extensive and comparable to the accounts obtained in the interviews, the two different approaches used for gathering data may have had an impact on the data collected. Second, the retrospective nature of the study may have affected the accuracy of the data. Consequently, it is possible that the Olympic medallists had reported 'faded' perceptions of the relationship with their coach due to the passage of time.

Research on auto-biographical memories suggests that memories tend to be most clear and reliable when the self and goals are highly integrated during encoding and retrieval of the experiences (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The pursuit and subsequent attainment of Olympic success suggests such a high level of integration, affirming acceptable levels of reliability of the participants' memories.

A further point to note concerns is the limited data obtained relevant to the negative relational aspects. It is possible that the Olympic medallists had repressed negative or unpleasant memories. Although, this could be possible, there is little supporting research concerning repressed or unrecovered memories (Loftus, 1997). What is likely to have happened in this study is simply underreporting or information withhold (cf. Pope, 1997). Future research that aims to tease out the negative aspects of interpersonal relationships in sport should be particularly sensitive because the disclosure of such information is often embarrassing, threatening and undesirable for the athletes and/or coaches. Finally, the absence of a coach perspective prevented untangling the intricacies involved in a complex two-person relationship in sport settings. The inclusion of both the coach and the athlete's perspectives in future research is important because it will contribute to a more holistic view of the nature and significance of the athlete–coach relationship.

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Appendix A

Standardised open-ended interview schedule.

1. What were the main features that characterised your athletic relationship with coach?*What features reinforced your relationship with your coach?* (*Probe*).
2. In what ways did the relationship you and your coach had developed contributed to your athletic success?*How did you relationship with your coach have an impact on your performance?* (*Probe*).
3. Can you think of any instances where you felt that working with your coach was ineffective?*Were there any moments of conflict or disagreement?* (*Probe*).
4. How would you describe an effective, or ideal, coach–athlete relationship?*Ideally, how would you have liked your relationship with coach to have been?* (*Probe*).
5. How do you describe your relationship in comparison with this ideal?*How was the relationship with your coach different from your ideal athlete–coach relationship?* (*Probe*).

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