

“You can be my coach, but I am the one in charge”

## An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the importance of the coach-athlete relationship in Norwegian super-elite athletes

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of the coach-athlete relationship for two Norwegian male super-elite athletes. By means of semi-structured interviews and the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) the results revealed four emergent themes that represent underlying dynamics that influenced the athletes' perception of what constitute an effective coach-athlete relationship; 1) Extreme independence. 2) Coaching without skills? 3) The coach as a butler, and 4) Expectations – make it or break it. These underlying dynamics are further discussed using the theoretical frameworks of coping strategies and power with the need for control as an important common denominator.

Key words: world-class sport, relationship dynamics, power, super-elite athletes, IPA

### Introduction

According to Jowett and Cockerill (2002), the coach-athlete relationship refers to all situations in which a coach's and an athlete's thoughts, feelings and behaviours are reciprocally and mutually related. In regard to the conceptualization of the coach-athlete relationship, the most widely used framework is the 3+1c model by Jowett (Jowett, Paull, Pensgaard, Hoegmo, & Riise, 2005). The model consists of four key properties;

closeness (e.g. the extent to which the coach and the athlete care for, support and value each other), commitment (e.g. the coach and the athlete's intention to maintain their relationship), complementarity (e.g. how the coach and athlete's behaviours correspond and complement each other), and co-orientation (e.g. the degree to which the coach and the athlete have a common ground about the nature of their relationship). Taken together, these four relational constructs define the relationship quality between the coach and each athlete in a team or a squad (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016). Several studies have emphasized the importance of the coach-athlete relationship given that high relationship quality is associated with effective coaching

behaviours (Olympiou, Jowett & Duda, 2008) and more satisfaction with training, performance and coach treatment (Jowett, Shanmugam, & Caccoulis, 2012).

However, several studies have also shown that coaches are considered a significant stressors for athletes (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Gould, Greenleaf, Guinan, Dieffenbach, & McCann, 2001; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Pensgaard & Ursin, 1998), and in a study conducted with the purpose to investigate how the coach-athlete relationship affected athletes' stress appraisals, the results revealed that commitment was positively associated with threat appraisals, indicating that there might be some negative implications of having a highly committed coach-athlete relationship (Nicholls et al., 2016). These results are interesting because they shed light on the complexities claimed to exist in the coach-athlete relationship. In fact, according to Cushion (2010), there is a need to further investigate the complex relationship that exist between the coach and the athlete more deeply, as coaching is a social activity that is always influenced by the opportunities, but also the constraints, associated with human interaction.

Super-elite athletes (gold medallists at the Olympics or World Championships) have not just managed to achieve very high performance levels, they have also demonstrated the ability to perform exceptionally well under the extremely challenging circumstances faced by world-class athletes (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2007; Jones & Hardy, 1990). In fact, there is now a growing recognition that there are subtle, yet decisive differences between those athletes who win gold at the Olympics and World Championships, and those athletes (elite-athletes) who compete at the international level, but who do not achieve medals (Hardy et al., 2017; Rees et al., 2016). According to Hardy et al. (2017) super-elite athletes have, compared to elite-athletes, an elevated need for success, they are more obsessive or perfectionistic in regard to their training and performance, they are also more ruthless and selfish in their quest for success, and they place the relative

importance of sport over other aspects of life, including interpersonal relationships. The characteristics of being ruthless and selfish in their quest for success, and placing sport over interpersonal relationships are not necessarily compatible with relationship quality operationalized through the 3c+1c model if this also applies to the coach. Since there is now a growing recognition that there are differences between super-elite athletes compared to elite athletes (also called super-champs or super-champions) (Collins & Macnamara, 2017; Collins, MacNamara, & McCarthy, 2016; Hardy et al., 2017; Rees et al., 2016) it is also interesting to explore how these differences might affect such an important relationship as the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett, 2005).

Based on an interest in the dynamics and the complexities of the coach-athlete relationship, and the small, but decisive differences between super-elite athletes and elite athletes, the purpose of this study was to explore the underlying dynamics that operate within the coach-athlete relationship seen from the perspective of these unique individuals. Since cultural aspects can impact the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016), it is worth noting that there is an egalitarian culture in Scandinavia. Scandinavians appreciate the value of low power distance as this promotes and provides egalitarian values. Delegation of responsibility is also a dominant feature of Scandinavian management (Warner-Söderholm, 2012).

Because the purpose of this study was to obtain a detailed understanding of this unique athlete group, the use of a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. This is supported by other researchers who argue that a qualitative approach may be particularly suited when your goal is to obtain detailed information about significant or specific groups, in this case world-class athletes (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999; Simonton, 1999). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative method that is considered to be particularly suitable if one is interested in elucidating complex or dynamic phenomena (Smith & Osborn, 2003), in this

case the coach-athlete relationship. Our interest was to establish a contextualized perspective of these super-elite athletes' experiences related to the coach-athlete relationship, and as the purpose of IPA is detailed analysis of personal experiences, the importance of these experiences to the participants, and how they attach meaning to these experiences (Smith, 2011), it was therefore chosen as the methodology for this study.

## Method

IPA is a qualitative methodology developed in the field of psychology. Using an ideographic approach with its theoretical foundation in phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA can provide unique insight into personal meaning making (Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Several theoretical positions within phenomenological philosophy provide the phenomenological foundation of IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Particularly evident is, however, Husserl and his concern about finding the essence of experience. Still, in IPA, this aspect is modified to the attempt to capture particular experiences as experiences for specific people (Smith et al., 2009). From Heidegger, the most significant contribution to IPA is the recognition that meaning-making necessarily entails an interpretative process for both the participant and the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2015). In this regard, the IPA's theoretical grounding in hermeneutics also becomes evident as the researcher tries to make sense of the participant's attempt to make sense of their experiences, which implies a double hermeneutics. Based on this foundation, it is of particular importance within IPA that there is a close link between the account coming from the participant and the interpretive analysis conducted by the researcher (Smith, 2017). Although we consider IPA to be the most appropriate method for this study, it is still worth noting that the phenomenological grounding of IPA has led to criticism from those situated within more structured or purely phenomenological methods (Giorgi, 2011; van Manen,

2018). In an attempt to clarify the practical implications of IPA's theoretical grounding in both phenomenology and hermeneutics, it may be appropriate to say that phenomenology has been an important inspirational source for IPA, but that its main focus is on interpretation (hermeneutics) (Miller, Cronin, & Baker, 2015).

The foundations in ideography can be seen in IPA's focus on specifics. This is particularly apparent in two areas: a focus on details and in-depth analysis; and the researcher's duty to recognise how an experiential phenomenon has been interpreted through the lens of a specific group of people in a specific context. This is also the main reason why IPA emphasises that there should be small strategic samples in studies that use IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

## Participants

The participants in this study were two Norwegian male athletes in individual sports who had performed at the super-elite level over an extended period of time, and they were both Olympic gold medallists. The inclusion criteria chosen were that the participants should have two or more medals from world championships, Olympic Games or competitions at an equivalent level. The participants had been professional, full-time athletes who made a living as sportsmen, but they had both retired when the interviews took place. Since IPA takes an idiographic approach, with the aim of understanding a specific phenomenon in a specific context, there is a strong emphasis on performing a detailed analysis of each individual case (Smith et al., 2009). On account of this exhaustive analytical process, studies that use IPA often have a small sample size (Smith & Osborn, 2007), which was also the case in this study. In line with the recommendations for IPA, the participants in this study were relatively homogeneous as they were both men, they were approximately the same age, they both competed in individual sport over an extended time period, and most importantly, both of them had won Gold in the

Olympics. They were both strategically selected for the purpose of the study (Smith et al., 2009).

## Procedure

The athletes received information about the study and an invitation to participate in writing. It was stressed that participation in the study was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study if they so wished without having to give any reasons. It was also emphasised that the interviews would be treated confidentially. In order to ensure this confidentiality, the names of the participants are replaced with Athlete 1 and Athlete 2. The data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews. In its entirety, the interview guide consisted of questions and prompts intended to disclose experiences and contextual details, and how the participant made sense of these. As researchers, in order to be given access to the participants' stories and experiences, we needed them to trust us sufficiently to open up and talk freely. To build sufficient trust is a central aspect to this kind of phenomenological work because, as a researcher, you are dependent on the participants to tell a stranger about their personal experiences (Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005). To facilitate rapport, we started each interview with a conversation about the participant's career, how it all started and developed, important events early in their career and their experience of being an elite athlete over an extended period. As the aim of IPA is to understand how participants view a specific phenomenon in a specific context (Smith et al., 2009), we also included questions that gave the participants an opportunity to describe their experiences of the context of elite sport and of being a part of that context. Later in the interview the questions homed in on the participants' experiences, feelings and views on the coach-athlete relationship, with an emphasis on using wordings that encouraged the participants to tell their stories, such as: "Can you describe your relationships with your coaches?", "What has been your experience of changing coach?", "Can

you describe an incident or episode where the relationship between you and your coach could have worked better?", "What do you consider to be the most important job of the coach of a (national) team?", "With hindsight, is there anything that you wish your coaches had not done?". One aspect of the phenomenological approach that was essential at this point was that the researcher invited the participant to give detailed descriptions of actual experiences that had occurred. In addition to these general topics and questions, there were follow-up questions such as: "How did you feel about that?", "What did you think about that?", "How did you react to that?" and "Would you do the same again?". Every effort was made to ensure that the interviews drew out the participants' views on, and assessments of, the coach-athlete relationship in elite sport in order to understand their story, and not our definition or interpretation of the importance of this relationship for athletes at this level. This approach is also in accordance with the phenomenological foundation in which the participant is considered to be the expert, and it is his/her experiences and opinions that he/she associates with those of interest to the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

As the participants themselves were allowed to choose where they wanted to be interviewed, one of the interviews took place at the athlete's home, while the other one took place in a meeting room at the participant's current workplace. Audio recordings were made of the interviews, and the recordings were written up verbatim.

As this study was part of a larger research project<sup>1)</sup>, the interviews were relatively long, with one of them lasting 1 hour 48 minutes and the other one lasting 2 hours 50 minutes. The first author carried out both interviews.

<sup>1)</sup> As these super elite athletes retired from their outstanding careers we conducted an interview covering several psychological aspects related to performance in world class sport, including the coach-athlete relationship.

## Analysis

The interviews were transcribed in their entirety by the first author in order to facilitate further detailed analyses. The analysis of each case largely followed the four steps set out in Smith et al. (2009). The first step of the analysis primarily involved familiarising ourselves with the transcript, in order to gain a thorough knowledge of the participants. The transcript was therefore read repeatedly before performing any further analysis. During the process of interpretation, it is vital for the researcher to continuously reflect on and be aware of his or her own preconceptions about the data, and strive not to be influenced by them, in order to fully focus on the experiences and experiential world of the participant. In practice, this meant that the first author, who conducted the analysis, spent time articulating and clarifying her own preconceptions related to the topic before she initiated the analysis as a starting point of the hermeneutical circle. This initial bracketing was carried out both independently and in collaboration with the second author. To preserve the cyclical approach to bracketing (Smith et al., 2009), the first author continued to reflect openly with the second author throughout the process of analysis. During the analytical process, the focus of the research switches back and forth between what the participant is saying and the researcher's own interpretation of the account and its meaning. This results in a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009). Naturally following on from the first step, a more extensive textual analysis took place, focusing on the participants' thoughts and experiences with respect to the coach-athlete relationship. Here the principal aim was to produce comprehensive, detailed comments on, and annotations to, the data (Smith & Osborn, 2003). These exploratory annotations highlight the phenomenological perspective of IPA, as the analytical focus is directed at the participants' explicit statements and at how they attempt to attach meaning to their feelings and experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

In other words, the interpretations that were made at this stage of the analysis were based on the participants' statements, and not on any theoretical models and/or frameworks. These comprehensive annotations then provided the foundation for the next step of the analysis: developing the emergent themes. In practice, the process of identifying the emergent themes involved focusing on various parts of the transcript without losing sight of the overall picture provided by the initial annotations (Smith et al., 2009). The purpose of this dual focus was to identify the main themes that emerged, while also keeping hold of the complexity and interconnections from the previous analyses. This part of the analytical process is a good illustration of the hermeneutic circle, where what has previously been analysed as a whole is split into several parts, before being reconstructed as a new whole prior to the final analysis and presentation of the results (Smith et al., 2009). In order to do this as successfully as possible, we next focused on how to stitch together the emergent themes and create a structure that would allow us to clearly get across what we considered to be the most interesting and important aspects of what the participants had emphasised in their stories (Smith et al., 2009). The whole process was repeated for both cases. In the final step of the analytical process, we searched for patterns in the two cases by looking at their similarities and differences. This comparison revealed several similarities between the accounts of the two participants. Nevertheless, although there were sufficient similarities for some aspects of the two participants' accounts to be encompassed by the same general theme, they still had unique experiences within that theme. Their unique experiences were interesting in their own right, but perhaps most of all because, within the common theme, one of the cases helped to nuance and illuminate the other case. All three authors have worked with elite athletes for a long time, giving them a unique personal insight from having experienced the context of elite sport from the inside.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to improve our knowledge and understanding of the feelings and experiences of two male super-elite athletes in individual sports with respect to the dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship. There were four principal emergent themes; 1) Extreme independence, 2) Coaching without skills?, 3) The coach as a butler, and 4) Expectations – make it or break it.

### Extreme independence

As elite athletes, they had taken personal responsibility for their own performance development. They were the independent drivers of their own process towards achieving the requirements of elite sport. Athlete 1 stated very clearly that he only focused on himself and on what it was important for him to prioritise in order to perform to the best of his ability:

Personally, as an athlete, I did not have anything to do with sports policy and sports organisations. I was up there with the worst of them in terms of being an extreme individualist, and for me elite sport was all about structure and focus. Daily, weekly, monthly, annual structure and focus. First you establish the structure and then you focus on sticking to it; that is what elite sport is all about. What The Top Sport Centre did, what the federation did and what event organisers did, I really could not care less, I only focused on what could hopefully improve my performance. Extremely egotistical and no doubt not very nice.

Expressing himself very clearly and fluently, Athlete 1 tells us the story of his life as a super-elite athlete. He knows the story well, and he has a thoughtful, self-aware relationship to it. In doing so, he clearly defines what elite sport is all about, and also what it is not about. For him, it was about including and excluding things, and the only things he included were

related to performance and things he could control. This also applies to other people, and Athlete 1 chose to behave in a manner that in many ways was incompatible with good, close relationships, justifying it with the contextual requirements of elite sport. The fact that Athlete 1 prioritised maximising his performance development over maintaining relationships is even clearer from the following passage:

When I was an athlete, I was probably better suited to an individual sport than a team sport, but if I had been in a team, I think I would have had exactly the same attitude: I'll do my thing and if I think the coach is not helping me to optimise my training and performance, I'll say that, and if that means I will not be on the team then so what, it is their loss [chuckles] [...]. Obviously that is not so easy if you're eighteen or nineteen and you're not sure if you have the courage.

Again, we can see the categorical and uncompromising attitude that underpins what Athlete 1 believes are the right choices. If he feels that something or someone, including the coach, is not supporting his performance development, he excludes them from the world of his sporting performance by taking away their ability to influence him. At the same time, he recognises that it would not be as easy for a younger athlete to take this self-centred approach. What is it, then, that makes it so much easier for him? It is not so much a question of age, but rather of differences in performance level and past results: having achieved certain results gives you certain possibilities that you do not have if your performance level is lower. His achievements as one of the best athletes in his sport over an extended period mean that Athlete 1 undoubtedly understands what elite sport involves and what is required to perform at that level, and in one sense, that protects him against any attack from outsiders. It also gives him the power of definition with respect to how things should be done and what the right

choices are. Having the authority required to justify an uncompromising and self-centred attitude, which in many other contexts would be considered socially unacceptable, is a privilege of power that is only granted to the very best. They can allow themselves to be more individualistic than athletes performing at a lower level.

Athlete 2 is not as clear and fluent in what he says, but it still becomes apparent that he was strongly individualistic as an athlete. Here he describes what he considers the defining trait of elite athletes in Norway:

A: Norwegian athletes are very independent-minded – they coach themselves – but the further east you head in Europe, the more it becomes the coach who is the boss, and I know of athletes my age who have never planned a training session in their lives, which seems really weird to me [chuckles].

Q: Do you think that elite sport, or elite [his sport], has developed a lot in recent years?

A: The athletes who do well have not changed a lot.

Q: What are the athletes who do well like?

A: [Pause, he chuckles] I think they are extremely focused on their goals. I think they are willing to do what is needed of them to reach their goals [pause]; that is what I think ... to summarise ... to summarise briefly.

Being independent-minded is not just about being independent. As an independent-minded person, you are also the brains behind your training. You design it, and make choices and decisions; you do not just implement a training programme independently. Athlete 2 also views the move towards having a coach who is the boss as something negative or sub-optimal. According to Athlete 2, the right thing is for the athlete to be in charge. If the athlete believes this, it will have a major impact on how the dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship develop. The relationship between the

coach and athlete exists because they want to achieve something, which in elite sport means performing at an exceptionally high level, and consequently obtaining results and positions. Athlete 2 also laughs at other athletes who have not planned their own training sessions. It goes against his view of what he as an elite athlete should be responsible for, and for him it represents a completely unthinkable relationship dynamic. For an athlete to relinquish the power to define his training regime is a sign of weakness, and it is something that he would never have been willing to do. Albeit somewhat more subtly expressed than in the case of Athlete 1, the picture that crystallises from what Athlete 2 says is of an athlete who puts himself in the driving seat and who demands the power to define, control and take responsibility for his own training and development as an athlete.

When he goes on to describe athletes who do well, he appears to use language as a kind of barrier. He is unwilling to fully reveal what defines athletes who succeed at the very highest level of sport. He becomes more hesitant in his choice of words, and he only wants to “summarise briefly”. He also refers to “Norwegian athletes” and “athletes who do well”. Given his performance level and achievements, it is natural to describe him as a Norwegian athlete who did well, and hence assume that he is talking about himself. Nevertheless, he uses language to create distance between the contents of what he is saying and himself as a person. The following statement illustrates even more clearly how Athlete 2 also uses what can be interpreted as inclusion and exclusion mechanisms to define the closeness of his relationship with his coaches and the amount he is willing to be influenced by them:

I am quite clear on what I want, although I'm open to getting feedback and new ideas, but equally I apply quite a fine filter to extract the things I think will help me to improve, so [pause] coaches need to have really good arguments before I listen to them.

The extreme selectivity that Athlete 2 refers to here highlights the power he had in his relationships with coaches. He was free to choose whether or not he wanted to take onboard their suggestions by implementing them in his plan and changing his conduct. It may appear that his results provided irrefutable evidence that he knew what it took to be a world-class athlete, and this justified the fact that the coach did not automatically have the chance to influence him. Rather, it was a vote of confidence if he did have the chance, as changing one's training regime at this level is very risky: any deterioration in performance and hence in results can be very damaging to an athlete in both the short and long term.

### Coaching without skills?

I think coaches too often, either because of their formal qualifications or the athletes they've trained in the past, gain a slightly unjustified authority. In my opinion, a population of 4-5 million people is not really enough to choose athletes from, and then it is definitely not enough to pick really good coaches from.

Athlete 1 is fundamentally sceptical of coaches and their skills, and he considers that they have too much authority. Here he appears to be referring to the kind of authority that results in a coach automatically having the right and ability to decide what an athlete should do to improve, rather than the athlete taking ownership of his own project, making his own choices and challenging the coach's opinions and knowledge. This is also clearly illustrated by his description of what he considers a good coach-athlete relationship to involve:

I think it involves keeping the lines of communication open, so you can give both criticism and praise, and it has to be a two-way process. It has to be acceptable for the coach to give constructive criticism to the athlete, and then it is almost essential for athletes these days to be

so conscious of what they are doing, of their training, that they are qualified to give constructive criticism in the other direction as well. I feel that I've seen too many set-ups where the coach has a one-way communication line down to the athlete, without any guarantee that the coach has the expertise to justify that one-way communication.

This is the kind of practice that Athlete 1 did not want to be a part of, as he considered it to be fundamentally wrong, and it is why he did not let coaches influence matters relating to his training programme. He considered the latter to be his own project, and he wanted to take responsibility for it himself, as he was the only person who through his performances had demonstrated that he knew what it took to perform at this level. Letting a coach get closely involved in the things that are of decisive importance to his performance development was a risk he was unwilling to take, as he did not have any guarantee that the coach had the necessary knowledge. He is completely categorical about this, and it applies to all coaches in Norway, as he believes that the total population is too small for there to be suitably qualified coaches. His statement shows that essentially it was very difficult for anyone to be considered a qualified coach in his eyes. In view of his previous claim that he was the only person qualified to have an opinion about his training and performance development, it appears that having performed at a high level as an athlete has more impact on whether he considers a coach properly qualified than courses and coaching experience. This is also underlined by his statements about his involvement in his own training programme:

I always wanted to have the last word, because I'm the person who knows what I can and cannot do; the coach does not know that, he does not have a clue.

Athlete 2, on the other hand, had greater trust in his



coaches and their knowledge about sport. As a result, he also included them to a greater extent than Athlete 1;

At the sports high school there was an incredible coach, Coach 1, who believed in the simple things, who you really trusted and who often said the right things. Then there was Coach 2 who cared **PASSIONATELY** [capitalised by first author to show that the word was stressed by the participant], and he had new ideas every ... practically every week, but he lacked the continuity of Coach 1. Then there was the first period with Coach 3 as my coach. Kept things just as simple as Coach 1, believed in the simple things, not very sociable in terms of bringing the group together, but managed to unite the team in spite of that ... Then with Coach 4 who was ... who maybe slowed me down in my training and was more cautious, but incredibly motivational in terms of good technique. Then a year with Coach 5 as my coach [pause]. Very similar to Coach 3, but maybe not ... not quite innovative enough for my liking, but still motivating and stuck to the simple things, but I felt a bit too much he was like a supply teacher at school [we chuckle], if you get my drift [laughs].

When describing the various coaches he had over the course of his career, Athlete 2 judges each coach on the basis of criteria related to the traits and skills he considers important for coaches, which are those that will maximise development and performance. At the same time, he compares the coaches with one another. It appears that Athlete 2 has very clear opinions about the criteria he uses to judge the quality of a coach. Coach 4 “slowed (him) down” in his training, and did not contribute to his development in the way that he wanted. The way in which the coach went about his work did not entirely correspond with Athlete 2’s view of what a coach should do. This negatively affected Athlete 2’s assessment of the coach’s quality, but it was counteracted by the coach’s strong skills in some other

areas. Athlete 2 shows an acceptance that coaches cannot be equally good in all areas. A coach can have strengths and weaknesses, but overall the coach must meet Athlete 2’s quality standards. If that is not the case, Athlete 2 will distance himself from the coach, taking away the coach’s ability to influence him, which will presumably also affect the quality of the relationship between them. Athlete 2 goes on to describe how he distanced himself from a coach and blocked his ability to influence training decisions when the coach no longer lived up to his expectations and requirements:

[...] and then I went back to Coach 3 for the last years of my career; he was maybe more of an adviser and manager than a coach now, and he became less and less of one, for me at least, in my eyes, although he disagreed, and then I had those three or four years when I had really decided on the right way for me, which was really motivating.

When the coach no longer met Athlete 2’s requirements for the role, he was downgraded from a coach to more of an adviser or manager in the athlete’s eyes. Athlete 2 was unwilling to compromise with his own convictions on what was needed to become the best, so he followed his own programme independently of the coach.

Athlete 1 is more unequivocal than Athlete 2 in his statements. Nevertheless, it is clear that both of them are classic individualists who prioritise themselves and their own performance development above all else. It is their personal assessments of quality that inform their decisions, regardless of what other people might think. This also applies to their experiences with respect to their coaches.

### The coach as a butler

Athlete 1’s unwillingness to let other people have any

say on matters relating to his performance inevitably affects his description of the roles that coaches have played for him:

No, they're coordinators, they play a big role in ensuring creativity, I think, creating variation, keeping you from getting bored, and then coaches are, and that is what I see today as well, they're basically administrators, in other words they make sure that the flights are booked and that the hotel room is there for you when you go on training camp, and that you get picked up at the airport, which is an important role as well.

[The coach] helped to make my day-to-day life easier, did some of the stuff to do with sponsors, arranged some training sessions, made sure there were always training facilities available, structured the training a bit so that it was appropriate, obviously created a bit of variation in my training, to get the right balance. A purely practical function, really.

Through his exclusion and inclusion mechanisms, he reduced the coach's role to responsibility for ensuring that everything surrounding him was perfectly taken care of, so that he himself could focus single-mindedly on completing high-quality training sessions. This clear description of the coach's role and of the purpose of the relationship supports the idea of an instrumental coach-athlete relationship, established in order to achieve specific goals and with a very clear division of responsibilities. Athlete 1 goes on to describe his relationships with his coaches as follows:

It was a lot of fun, socially it was really important, and important to me feeling happy. It is important to have some time off, even at training camps, there are many things you can do between sessions that helps you to recover properly mentally as well, and not just physically; to have a chance to chat about things that are nothing to do with sport, you

know, and obviously you can also discuss your training, but it is just as important as a catalyst, really.

It is only in conjunction with the need for socialising that other people and relationships become really important to him, as it is impossible to have a good time socialising on one's own. For the coach to satisfy this need, there must be some kind of emotional tie based on the coach and athlete enjoying each other's company, and their social interaction must actually promote happiness and mental recovery. Nevertheless, you do not need coaching skills to successfully fulfil this role. At a training camp, the coach meets this need because it is natural for a coach to be there with the athlete. During normal training at home, it could be just as natural for other people to perform this function. In view of Athlete 1's previous statements, one can assume that if the nature of the social interaction had not promoted his happiness, relaxation and mental recovery, the coach would probably have been excluded or replaced, as he would not have been helping to make the athlete's day-to-day life easier. Instead, he would have been considered a disturbance.

Athlete 2's comments also make it clear that his relationship with his coaches was instrumental, and that both parties had to live up to certain requirements and expectations:

I think they've been good [his relationship with his coaches]; I think I've always been very fair. I think I've said relatively early on if there is anything that ... um ... is not working [...], and I've yet to find a coach who has challenged me too much or who has set standards that I have not been able to achieve. Looking back, I slightly regret not having experienced that, but I've always appreciated an argument or a discussion, whether it is about the type of coach or the coaching philosophy.

He uses the word “fair” to describe his behaviour in relationships. This shows that he is comparing himself according to something, in this case probably on what he required and expected of his coaches, and on how he handled the situation when he felt that his coaches were not living up to his standards. This shows that his relationships with his coaches were primarily instrumental, and that he measures the quality of those relationships against a scale based on the extent to which the coaches met his requirements and expectations. At the same time, he points out that he has always expected and required more of himself than those around him have. There may be a sense of reassurance and satisfaction to be had from never having failed to meet other people’s requirements and expectations. At least according to his own judgement.

Arguments and discussions are also factors that can definitely affect the quality of a relationship. Athlete 2 considers them positive because they were about the type of coach and coaching philosophy. These are the two areas that Athlete 2 considers must conform to his view of what is optimal for his development. It is also agreement and satisfaction with respect to these two matters that determines his assessment of the quality of his relationship with his coaches. Furthermore, Athlete 2’s positive attitude towards getting new coaches reflects the fact that he did not build close emotional ties to them;

Q: What has been your experience of changing coach during your career?

A: Very good. Getting fresh blood into a team, getting new opinions, a new focus.

Q: Does it take you a long time to build up trust with new coaches?

A: No [pause], not really.

They are in a relationship because they want to achieve results. The performance demands are so high that they are the only thing Athlete 2 cares about, and they determine whether or not a relationship is

maintained. The reference to the benefit of getting “fresh blood” into the team is also indicative of the instrumentality of the relationship, and of the fact that everything is judged in terms of the contribution a coach makes to further progress.

### Expectations – make it or break it

Based on the analyses, an emergent theme for both athletes is expectations of their coaches and how close or distant a relationship they wanted with them. Nevertheless, there are differences between them in this area, on account of the varying extents to which they included their coaches in their training and their differing expectations of their coaches and the coaching role. Athlete 2’s account contained distinct observations and experiences that were of significance and relevance to his relationship dynamics with the coach, thus his experiences were given more space under this topic.

As we have seen previously, Athlete 1 categorically excluded the coach from his “innermost” performance development process. This appear to have protected him against the coach becoming a disturbance;

Q: Could the coach have any negative impact on you? For example if the practical arrangements were not in place, or any other things?

A: No, not really, because I’ve always said it is me, and just me, who is responsible for my performance; I have to do the [...] every single metre, no one is there to [...] for me, not during training, not during competition, I have to lift the weights myself, I have to do the explosiveness training myself, I have to do the base miles, the intervals; so it is just me, I do not want anyone else to get involved, I have to do it myself.

Q: Have you ever been faced with someone having different expectations of the coach-athlete relationship than you?

A: No, not personally, but maybe that is because I'm a bit like, you know [chuckles] [...]. 'You're welcome to be my coach, but I'm the one in charge.

Q: If he [the coach] does not have the same expectations, he has to develop them?

A: No, there is more respect than that, you know. But I did not see it as a ... as an absolute necessity to have that relationship, to have a coach around me or to have one in place. Ninety percent of what I did was done without my coach being present.

By acting in accordance with his insistence on having sole responsibility for his training, Athlete 1 simultaneously minimises the risks associated with becoming dependent on other people or vulnerable to their ability to affect him. He has absolute power of definition over how things should be done and how they should proceed. This position of power also allows him to make choices without having to consider what other people, including his coaches, might think of them. The coach must do whatever fits in with his perception of what will maximise his chances of performing well. How this affects the coach's perception of him as a person or the quality of their relationship is irrelevant, as the only thing that matters is performance development. In addition to the thematic content of Athlete 1's account, it is worth noting his comment that "No, I mean there is more respect than that, you know". Here he corrects my interpretation of what he has said. In other words, he shows that he wants the message that comes across to be credible and truthful. To ensure that, he stresses that there was more respect in the relationship, and that he had more respect for the work of the coach, than first author as the interviewer initially interpreted him as implying. This statement may also appear to authenticate Athlete 1's account as a whole, as it clarifies and confirms that he wants my interpretation of his words to be as close as possible to his own experience.

Although Athlete 2 was an individual athlete, he was also part of the national team. When he talks about the coach's most important role within the team, it becomes clear that he has greater expectations than Athlete 1 of the coach being involved in training and performance development:

[The coach's most important task in a team] is to lay the master plan, the one that controls the team [pause] ... um ... to some extent, but without a leader in the group the coach does not really stand a chance, because he does not actually do the training sessions. When you are out training, building up the team spirit, if you do not have someone who is willing to lead the team, a captain if you like, then the team falls apart.

The expectation that coaches should develop the master plan also encompasses an expectation of a closer relationship with them, because you're letting them in and giving them the opportunity to influence the training itself and the decisions that are made with respect to training. Nevertheless, the coach is dependent on the athletes choosing to follow the coach's master plan when they are out training. In other words, the athletes have the freedom and power to decide whether or not they will allow the coach to perform what Athlete 2 considers to be the coach's most important task. It is interesting to look at the significant amount of power that Athlete 2 realised he wielded over the coach, and at the consequences of him choosing to exercise that power:

And then I had Coach 6 as my coach, who was someone I did not have confidence in as a coach, but as I said to him on the first day, 'I do not really have confidence in you as a coach, but I believe we are going to work together.

Here Athlete 2 explains that he was confident that he and the coach would work together, but in practice

it turned out differently because he, and the other athletes in the team, did not have any confidence in this coach's master plan:

Q: How was the team affected when you changed coaches?

A: Generally, or ... yes, generally positively, but with Coach 6 it did not work out, and suddenly the team was all over the shop with different opinions and different training philosophies.

Q: What were the consequences of that?

A: Well, the results were not too bad, but we had to change coach again the following year, so not everyone fits in as a coach.

Athlete 2 thus prejudged the coach before he has even started in the job. The coach did not satisfy any of the athlete's criteria for a good coach, and consequently there was no basis for a relationship. Athlete 2 rejected the coach and gave him no possibility to take part in his development. Viewed from the outside this may appear ruthless, but from Athlete 2's point of view this ruthlessness is a legitimate part of the quest for world-class performances and results. At the same time, it is worth noting the differences between Athlete 1 and Athlete 2 in this context. Athlete 1 had no expectation of the coach contributing to his training programme, and he simply did not want the coach to have any involvement in it at all. That attitude also protected him against any strife and a boycott of the coach of the kind described by Athlete 2. Athlete 2, meanwhile, did expect the coach to contribute to his training activities. He had strong opinions about what the right choices were to maximise performance development and what characteristics a good coach should have, and as we have seen the coach had to live up to those expectations from the beginning for the athlete to allow the coach to have any influence over him. For Athlete 2 it is impossible for a coach to build up trust, as it must be there from the start. However, it turns out that even if Athlete 2 initially had confidence in a coach, he

regularly reassessed whether the coach was still living up to his expectations and requirements, and if he found that the coach was no longer contributing in a way that he considered optimal, it became a source of conflict and led to a deterioration in the quality of their relationship:

I felt that the coaching role of Coach 3 had been diluted over the past year, and I took action, kind of explained what was behind the problem, how shall I put it ... he said he felt the chemistry was not right and that it had not been right for perhaps two months [...] and he asked me what was wrong, and I was totally prepared for that and I decided to have it out. Maybe it was unfair not to give him a second chance, but I did not [...]. I had written down all of the things that I was unhappy with and what my conclusion was, which Coach 3 took really personally and very much as a personal attack, even though I said you're the best organiser for the team, but as a coach I think you're doing a really lousy job, and I need more ... more feedback. We had a meeting at [location] after that, where he said he was not particularly pleased with the way I had handled things.

A diluted coaching role means that the coach is no longer living up to Athlete 2's expectations. However, he did not raise the issue when he started to notice it. Instead, he waited for the coach to realise it and raise it with him. This appears to suggest that Athlete 2 had an expectation that the coach would himself realise that he was no longer performing his job in a satisfactory manner. This required the coach to be aware of Athlete 2's expectations of him, which Athlete 2 appears to take for granted that he was. When the coach eventually realised that something was wrong and raised the matter with Athlete 2, in many ways it was too late. Athlete 2 was well-prepared, and he says that he had it out with the coach. He wanted to tell the coach, once and for all, that he was not doing a good enough job. He

had reached his conclusion before the meeting and he explains quite openly that he did not give the coach an opportunity to make any changes in response to the feedback given. Athlete 2 was ruthless when the coach no longer met his requirements and expectations. By then he no longer had any confidence in the coach, which meant there was no reason to maintain their relationship. In fact, when asked whether he would do the same thing again, he responds “I would do it again and maybe I should have done it even earlier”, which shows clearly that he is still convinced that he handled the situation in the correct and best possible way. There is no self-criticism for the uncompromising way he chose to handle the situation and the coach.

By using IPA as the qualitative approach we have in our study gained an insider perspective of the unique relationships found in an environment at the absolute highest level in sport, investigating the coach-athlete relationship from the perspective of two super-elites.

## Discussion

The overall findings in the emergent themes; 1) Extreme independence 2) Coaching without skills? 3) The coach as a butler 4) Expectations – make it or break it, indicate that these two super-elite athletes were extremely dedicated to their sport, they had a very clear opinion about what was required for them to maintain their success, and they were willing to do whatever was needed of them to “stay true” to their convictions. These findings are in accordance with the findings of Hardy et al. (2017) which indicated that super-elite athletes place the relative importance of their sport and their need to succeed over other aspects of life. However, in the current study, as the aim was to explore the dynamics and complexities within the coach-athlete relationship, our findings also illuminate how the specific characteristics of super-elite athletes might affect the relationship dynamics between the athlete and the coach at this level of sport. For instance, the participants’ assessments of their coaches’ abilities were

based on their convictions about what was the best and right thing to do. Their convictions about what was the best and right thing to do also served as an essential motivator to include or distance themselves from their coach to maintain relationship dynamics that provided them control over the decisions and choices made within the relationship. Together, these findings give a picture of the key underlying dynamics that affected the two athletes’ perceptions of what was the hallmark of an effective coach-athlete relationship. Their actions towards their coaches also appeared to arise from their need to maintain their subjectively perceived degree of control. Having a high level of perceived control has been shown to be a key factor in relation to experiencing and coping with stress (Edwards & Hardy, 1996; Ursin, 1988). Since elite athletes consider their coach to be a potential key stress factor, it makes sense to discuss our findings in relation to relevant research on stress and coping mechanisms. This will shed light on whether the participants’ accounts and stories can be considered descriptions of coping strategies designed to manage their coach as a stress factor and on how coping strategies aimed at reducing stress also constitute part of the underlying dynamics that influence their relationships with their coaches.

## Coping strategies

Athletes in elite sport must continuously appraise a wide range of potential stressors known to influence both their performance and well-being (Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012) Also, early research helped to elucidate that in the case of elite athletes, a high degree of perceived control is an important factor in relation to both the experience and ability to cope with stress (Edwards & Hardy, 1996; Pensgaard & Ursin, 1998). Our study, indeed, also found control and actions taken to maintain a high level of perceived control to be particularly important. A recurring theme in the athletes’ stories was that what mattered was their personal goal achievement and level of performance,

and that their choices and actions were largely designed to maintain as much control as possible. This applied to everything from their definition of elite sport and the attributes of an elite athlete through to the extent to which they were willing to allow their coach to influence them and what they required and expected of their coach. Interestingly, it has been shown earlier that elite athletes who experience their coach as a major stressor also report a resulting lack of control and dissatisfaction with their performance (Pensgaard & Ursin, 1998). Thus, it makes sense that athletes who have reached a superior level will try to be in charge of their situation, as much as they can, including their defined relationship with their coach.

Contemporary research focusing on stress and coping in sport has typically used Lazarus and Folkman (1984) transactional conceptualization of stress (Miles, Neil, & Barker, 2016). Based on this conceptualization, stress is considered as an ongoing transaction between the stressors that emanate from the given environment and the resources of the person operating within it, with the process of cognitive appraisal and coping strategies important to how the individual responds to transactions (Arnold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2017; Miles et al., 2016). The informants in our study had performed at a world-class level over an extended period of time, they had also undergone a long learning process in terms of understanding what created stress for them and how to manage it in order to maintain as much control as possible. Although previous studies have shown that viewing your coach as a stressor is associated with a low degree of control and dissatisfaction with performances, in this study it appears that all of the choices and actions of the athletes are governed by how they defined the following areas: elite sport as a context with its requirements for continuous goal achievement and performance development; themselves as elite athletes; the role of the coach; and the characteristics of a good relationship dynamic. Over time, it seems that they learned to manage their coach as a stressor, and their definition of having a good relationship and

an appropriate relationship dynamic with one's coach is based on their experiences of how they were able to maintain as much control as possible over a key stressor with the potential to threaten their struggle to achieve their personal goals, and thereby maximise their chances of enduring satisfaction with their own performances.

Obviously more research is required, but it would be interesting to investigate further whether the way in which super-elite athletes define their context, their expectations of themselves and their coaches, and the nature of a good relationship and an effective relationship dynamic with their coach, really is a form of learned coping strategy or mechanism designed to maintain as much control as possible and thereby maximise the chance of achieving personal goals and satisfying the rigorous demands of elite sport. Or put another way, the athletes' view of the context, themselves and their coach is, at least in part, based on and motivated by their belief that the athlete should be in control in the coach-athlete relationship. Having control is in many ways about having the power to make decisions.

## Power

To explore the concept of power in coaching, several researchers have applied the concepts of Bourdieu (Cushion & Jones, 2006, 2014; Purdy, Jones, & Cassidy, 2009). Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most respected sociologists of our time, is perhaps particularly well-known for his work on the concept of power, which has proved to provide a useful framework for research that aims to increase our understanding of how power works and operates in the context of sport (Cushion & Kitchen, 2011). Most research into power in the context of sport has viewed athletes as relatively passive actors who are primarily subjected to power (Cushion & Jones, 2006, 2014; Johns & Johns, 2000; Jones, Glintmeyer, & McKenzie, 2005). That does not correspond with the findings of this study. The two

athletes in this study have demonstrated an ability to achieve excellent results in the most prestigious international competitions (Olympic Games and World championship) over an extended period, thereby proving that they can cope with the very high demands of this context, which is something that very few people manage, even within the world of elite sport. In other words, they belong to a very exclusive club, and that fact is likely to be a key contributing factor to why the balance of power in their relationships with their coaches was different from the one observed in most previous studies. However, Purdy et al. (2009) showed in their study on athletes' use of power in an elite men's rowing program that being the best athlete in the program gave a more advantageous position of power than the athletes who were not as good. Although the results in Purdy et al.'s (2009) study were not as clear as the data in this study, they still show the same tendency that performing at the highest level can provide power.

One of the crucial concepts in Bourdieu's theory of power is capital. Capital is the capacity you have to exercise power over your own and other people's future, and as such capital is a form of power (Jenkins, 2014; Ritzer, 1996). According to Bourdieu, society is structured on the basis of differences in the distribution of capital, and individuals are constantly striving to increase their own personal capital. The amount of capital an individual can accumulate have a significant impact when determining the choices available to that individual. Within sport, the differences in distribution of capital can be seen in the fact that coaching takes place within a hierarchical structure. The various forms of power – social, symbolic, cultural and physical – help to create a hierarchy that is both formal and informal and which encompasses both athletes and coaches. In their study of professional youth football, Cushion and Jones (2006) found that the amount of social capital held by each individual depended on their position in the team of coaches or group of athletes (e.g. head coach/assistant coach, professional athlete/young

athlete). Cultural capital was built up through experience and qualifications (e.g. understanding the cultural codes and language), and symbolic capital derived from fame, personal achievements and prestige. The overall amount of capital held determined the social hierarchy and structure at the club. Purdy and her colleagues (Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008) also found it essential to make use of the concepts of social, physical and symbolic capital in order to create an appropriate theoretical framework for the claims and internal struggles within a high-performance environment. As a result, the existence and role of capital in a sporting context is receiving increasing attention (Cushion & Kitchen, 2011). As achieving results is the clear aim of elite sport, and the basis for the relationship between the coach and athlete at this level, it is probably also the case that good results at super-elite level are the biggest contributor to accumulating all of the forms of power, as they represent an objective proof of success in an extremely demanding and goal-oriented context.

Using Bourdieu's definition of capital, it is clear that these athletes possessed more of the right kinds of capital, as their accounts reveal that they controlled their own futures, and those of their coaches, since they had the ultimate power to define and decide how close an involvement their coaches were allowed with the areas that had a direct impact on their performance development. As super-elite athletes, they had accumulated sufficient capital to be able to exercise the power to define the nature of both their own role and that of their coaches. They defined themselves and their own role by describing Norwegian super-elite athletes as independent-minded people who are their own coaches, for example. Meanwhile, they expressed a general lack of confidence in the abilities of coaches, saying that it is wrong for the coach to be the boss, and defining the role of coach as a purely practical coordinating function. These kinds of descriptions and views of themselves and their relationship partners are likely to have played a key role in setting the premises



for how their relationships worked in practice and which party had the ultimate power of definition.

The way in which the athletes manoeuvred and made use of inclusion and exclusion is also indicative of how they exercised their power and of what they believed were the right choices and actions to maintain and further increase their own power, both in the context as a whole and in their relationships with their coaches. Maintaining their performance level and thus achieving objectively good results was how they protected the capital that kept the balance of power in their favour in their relationships with their coaches.

The egalitarian culture in Scandinavia and its value of low power distance might also have been a contributing factor to the participants' ability to accumulate their specific power position. However, more research is required to investigate this aspect further.

## Conclusion

In our study, research related to coping strategies and power provided sound theoretical explanatory frameworks for these athletes' stories. Still, we do not claim that we have the gold standard or the truth about the underlying psychological mechanisms in the coach-athlete relationship for super-elite athletes. The foundations of IPA is its dedication to the individual's unique experiences. The focus of research using IPA is quality in terms of emphasizing details to capture the complexities and richness in each participant's personal story. Thus, the purpose of our study, through the use of IPA, was to commit ourselves to investigate in detail the lived experiences of our participants and to take their perspectives seriously. Because of its idiographic dedication, IPA studies often have a small number of participants. This is considered to be a value in itself as it provides an opportunity to get insight into the important meaning of each case (Smith, 2004).

Being part of an elite sport context that is characterized by very high performance requirements,

demands high quality deliveries of everyone involved. According to Jowett (2017) relationship quality within the coach-athlete relationship is of vital importance for successful outcomes. As a sport psychologist one will in many cases be a key support provider to both athletes and coaches when improvement of relationship quality is the purpose. The findings of this study can contribute to increased insight into the importance of underlying psychological mechanisms for athletes' perception of what constitute an effective relationship with their coach. This kind of knowledge can be very useful to further increase sport psychologists' understanding of the complexity that operate within the coach-athlete relationship at the world class level, and what might be suitable practical initiatives to enhance relationship quality.

Given that super-elite athletes have small but crucial differences compared to elite athletes (Hardy et al., 2017) and that elite sport is a context where small nuances and differences can have significant impact on the athletes' performance (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002), getting more detailed information from super-elite athletes, and also their coaches, can further increase our understanding and insight into the complexities within the coach-athlete relationship. Central to this matter may be the distinctive character and culture of the specific sport and the society, the number of days which the coach and the athlete travel together in the course of a year, athletes in individual sports versus athletes in team sports, as well as how dependent the athlete is on his/her coach to ensure high quality training on daily basis.

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