

Role of Coach–Athlete Relationship in Reducing Stress Among Male and Female Student-Athletes

Vidya Bhushan Sharma¹ and Dr. Mahesh Shridharrao Deshmukh²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Physical Education

²Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education
Sunrise University, Alwar, Rajasthan

Abstract: *Student-athletes experience a distinctive combination of academic, athletic, interpersonal, and organizational demands that can contribute to psychological stress. Within this environment, the coach–athlete relationship is particularly important because coaches influence training demands, performance expectations, communication, motivation, feedback, emotional support, and athletes' perceptions of competence and belonging. This research paper examines the role of coach–athlete relationship in reducing stress among male and female student-athletes through a review and synthesis of research published between 2010 and 2025. The paper focuses on the major relational dimensions of closeness, commitment, complementarity, communication, autonomy support, trust, and perceived social support. Evidence indicates that positive coach–athlete relationships can provide emotional and instrumental support, facilitate adaptive stress appraisal and coping, strengthen psychological safety, and reduce conditions associated with burnout.*

Keywords: Coach–athlete relationship, student-athletes, stress, social support, gender differences, psychological well-being, communication, athlete burnout

I. INTRODUCTION

Student-athletes occupy a complex social and developmental position because they must simultaneously meet the requirements of academic education and competitive sport. Their daily lives may involve lectures, examinations, assignments, training sessions, competitions, travel, physical conditioning, injury management, team responsibilities, and expectations concerning athletic performance. These demands can create multiple sources of stress that are not always independent of one another.

Academic pressure may interact with sporting pressure, while fatigue, injury, financial concerns, interpersonal difficulties, and uncertainty about performance may further increase psychological burden. Research on collegiate athletes has consequently identified the dual role of being both a student and an athlete as an important context for understanding stress and well-being. Simons and Bird's research with NCAA Division I student-athletes specifically emphasizes academic demands, time constraints, training, travel, injury, fatigue, and performance concerns as relevant stressors.

Within this environment, the coach–athlete relationship represents one of the most influential interpersonal relationships in sport. A coach is not simply responsible for technical instruction; the coach may also determine training structure, provide performance feedback, establish team norms, make selection decisions, communicate expectations, and influence athletes' perceptions of competence and belonging. Consequently, the quality of the relationship can influence how athletes interpret and respond to stressful situations.

The conceptualization of the coach–athlete relationship commonly emphasizes closeness, commitment, and complementarity, often referred to as the 3Cs model. Research validating the Coach–Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q) has provided a systematic way of measuring these dimensions. Rhind and Jowett (2010)

developed and examined longer versions of the questionnaire, while Balduck and Jowett (2010) reported acceptable psychometric properties for the coach version of the CART-Q.

A positive relationship can potentially operate as a psychological resource. When athletes perceive their coaches as trustworthy, respectful, approachable, and supportive, they may be more comfortable discussing performance concerns, academic pressures, injuries, emotional difficulties, and other problems. Such relationships may help athletes perceive demanding situations as manageable challenges rather than overwhelming threats. Research by Nicholls (2016), for example, found that closeness within the coach–athlete relationship was positively associated with challenge appraisals and negatively associated with threat appraisals. Their study included 274 athletes from the United Kingdom, Australia, and Hong Kong.

The relationship may also influence stress through communication and coping. Stress management in sport does not necessarily occur through individual coping strategies alone. Athletes frequently rely on coaches and teammates when responding to demanding situations. Research examining coach–athlete dyads has demonstrated the relevance of dyadic coping, whereby stress is managed through interpersonal processes rather than exclusively through individual psychological strategies. Perry (2016) examined 158 coach–athlete dyads and found that perceptions of relationship quality were connected with stress appraisals and dyadic coping. Similarly, Staff (2020) developed a grounded theory of dyadic coping in coach–athlete relationships and identified communication, including verbal and non-verbal communication, as important to coping processes.

The importance of the relationship becomes even clearer when negative relational experiences are considered. Controlling coaching, poor communication, lack of emotional support, excessive criticism, inconsistent expectations, and interpersonal conflict can make sporting environments more stressful. A study of 347 Korean collegiate athletes found that autonomy-supportive coaching was positively associated with communication and coach–athlete relationship quality, whereas controlling coaching was negatively associated with communication and positively associated with athlete burnout. Coach–athlete relationship quality was negatively related to burnout.

Gender is another important dimension in examining coach–athlete relationships. Male and female student-athletes participate within the same broader sporting environment, but their experiences may be shaped by differences in social expectations, communication patterns, team cultures, opportunities, institutional contexts, and perceptions of coaching behavior. Importantly, gender differences should be investigated empirically rather than assumed. Research on athlete burnout has identified gender as one factor that can moderate relationships between psychosocial conditions and athlete outcomes. Davis (2019), for instance, examined gender, age, and sport type as potential moderators of the relationship between coach–athlete relationship quality and burnout.

MAJOR DIMENSIONS OF THE COACH–ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

1. Closeness

Closeness refers to feelings such as trust, respect, appreciation, liking, and emotional connection between coach and athlete. A close relationship can provide athletes with a sense that their coach understands their individual circumstances. This may be especially relevant when athletes face academic difficulties, injury, performance anxiety, or personal challenges. The 3Cs framework places closeness alongside commitment and complementarity as a central component of relationship quality. Research on the CART-Q has supported the usefulness of these dimensions for assessing coach–athlete relationships.

Closeness may reduce stress because athletes are more likely to communicate concerns when they feel psychologically safe. For example, an athlete experiencing excessive fatigue may be more willing to inform a trusted coach about the problem instead of continuing training until the situation becomes more serious. Thus, closeness can facilitate early communication and potentially prevent relatively manageable problems from developing into major sources of distress.

2. Commitment

Commitment concerns the intention of both coach and athlete to maintain their relationship and work toward common goals. In a student-athlete context, commitment can provide stability and predictability. Athletes may experience

considerable uncertainty concerning selection, playing time, academic performance, competition outcomes, and future sporting opportunities. A committed relationship can help establish clearer expectations and provide continuity during difficult periods.

However, commitment should not be confused with unquestioning obedience. A healthy relationship allows athletes to express concerns and negotiate difficulties. Commitment is therefore most beneficial when combined with mutual respect and open communication.

3. Complementarity

Complementarity concerns coordinated and cooperative interaction between coach and athlete. Coaches provide instruction, leadership, feedback, and guidance, while athletes respond through participation, cooperation, effort, and communication. When these roles function effectively, the athlete may experience greater predictability and clarity.

Unclear roles, inconsistent feedback, or conflicting expectations may increase stress. Conversely, complementary interactions can reduce unnecessary uncertainty and allow athletes to concentrate on controllable aspects of performance.

COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP AND STRESS REDUCTION

The coach-athlete relationship can influence stress through several interconnected pathways. First, supportive coaches can provide emotional reassurance during periods of difficulty. Second, coaches can offer informational support by helping athletes understand training and performance problems. Third, coaches can provide instrumental assistance by modifying workloads, arranging recovery opportunities, or connecting athletes with appropriate institutional resources. Fourth, coaches can promote adaptive coping by encouraging athletes to focus on controllable goals rather than solely on competitive outcomes.

Evidence from young elite athletes illustrates the importance of social support in managing competitive and organizational stress. Kristiansen and Roberts (2010) found that young elite athletes experienced substantial competitive and organizational stress and relied on different forms of social support. Their findings emphasized the importance of a good coach-athlete relationship for coping and positive sport experiences.

COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP AND ATHLETE BURNOUT

Although burnout is conceptually different from stress, persistent stress can contribute to emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and sport devaluation. Consequently, burnout provides an important outcome through which the stress-related consequences of coach-athlete relationships can be examined.

A study of 359 athletes found negative relationships between perceived coach-athlete relationship quality and all three dimensions of athlete burnout. The research also suggested that mastery-approach achievement goals partially mediated relationships between coach-athlete relationship quality and burnout dimensions.

Similarly, Pacewicz (2019) concluded from their meta-analysis that positive aspects of the sport social context have potential to mitigate athlete burnout.

More recent evidence involving 295 young elite athletes, including 186 boys and 109 girls, found that athletes perceiving their coach-athlete relationship more negatively reported greater general and athlete-specific burnout symptoms. The study therefore reinforces the importance of relationship quality within younger athletic populations.

SUMMARY OF SELECTED EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Author/Year	Participants/Design	Major Variables	Major Findings Relevant to Present Topic
Kristiansen & Roberts (2010)	Young elite athletes; qualitative	Social support, competitive/organizational stress	Social support was important for coping; good coach-athlete relationships were highlighted as important for positive sport

			experiences.
Rhind & Jowett (2010)	Athlete/coach relationship research	CART-Q, relationship quality	Provided evidence for measuring coach-athlete relationship dimensions.
Nicholls et al. (2016)	274 athletes	Relationship, stress appraisal, coping	Closeness was associated with more challenge and less threat appraisal.
Thelwell et al. (2017)	13 elite athletes	Coach stress, athlete perceptions	Athletes reported that coach stress could influence their experiences and the broader relationship.
Pacewicz et al. (2019)	Meta-analysis	Social constructs and burnout	Social support and relatedness showed inverse relationships with burnout; negative social interactions showed positive relationships.
Kim et al. (2020)	347 Korean collegiate athletes	Coaching, communication, relationship, burnout	Autonomy-supportive coaching and better communication were associated with healthier relationship outcomes and lower burnout.
Simons & Bird (2022)	153 NCAA Division I student-athletes	Relationship, social support, well-being	Examined coach-athlete relationship and social support as factors associated with student-athlete psychological well-being.
College soccer study (2024)	College soccer players	Relationship, training satisfaction, burnout	Coach-athlete relationship negatively predicted burnout; training satisfaction partially mediated the relationship.
Female NCAA study (2025)	19 former female NCAA athletes	Relationship, support, mental health	Relationships could provide support but could also contribute to stress and disengagement depending on relational and institutional context.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHES AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The research evidence suggests several practical implications. First, coaches should establish communication practices that allow athletes to discuss concerns without automatically interpreting such communication as weakness or lack of commitment. Second, feedback should be specific, constructive, and balanced rather than predominantly punitive. Third, coaches can provide athletes with appropriate choices and explanations regarding training and performance decisions. Fourth, coaches should recognize that academic responsibilities are an important component of the student-athlete experience. Fifth, early signs of excessive stress, emotional exhaustion, disengagement, or declining motivation should be taken seriously.

Institutions can complement coaching practices by providing access to sport psychology, counselling, academic support, medical services, and confidential reporting mechanisms. This is particularly important because the coach should not be expected to serve as the sole source of psychological support. The evidence on social support suggests that athlete well-being is influenced by a broader network of interpersonal relationships.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite substantial progress in understanding coach–athlete relationships, several gaps remain. First, much research has focused on burnout rather than directly measuring perceived stress. Second, many studies use cross-sectional designs, which limit conclusions about temporal or causal relationships. Third, studies specifically comparing male and female student-athletes remain comparatively limited. Fourth, research has frequently focused on elite or collegiate athletes from Western countries, creating a need for culturally diverse research, including studies involving Indian student-athletes. Fifth, relatively little research simultaneously examines coach–athlete relationship quality, stress, social support, team climate, and gender.

II. CONCLUSION

The literature published between 2010 and 2025 provides substantial evidence that the coach–athlete relationship is an important psychosocial factor in the experiences of student-athletes. A high-quality relationship characterized by closeness, commitment, complementarity, trust, respectful communication, autonomy support, and perceived support can provide athletes with psychological resources for dealing with academic and sporting demands. Research indicates connections between relationship quality and stress appraisal, coping, psychological well-being, and burnout.

The relationship should not, however, be understood as a simple guarantee of lower stress. Student-athletes experience multiple sources of pressure, and coaches themselves operate within demanding organizational environments. Thelwell (2017) demonstrated that coaches' own experiences of stress can influence how athletes perceive them and the broader relationship. Therefore, effective stress reduction requires a broader environment involving coaches, teammates, families, academic staff, medical professionals, and mental-health resources.

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