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## **Abstract**

It is well established that coaching is a social process indexed to particular and dynamic contexts e.g., recreation sport, high-performance sport. Inherent to these contexts, and the social process, is the relationship between an athlete and a coach. It has been argued from moral, legal, and performance-enhancing perspectives that these relationships should be caring relationships, where coaches support athletes' with their sporting needs. Yet, our understanding of how coaches can develop such caring relationships remains somewhat partial. This is because to date, coaches' perspectives have largely dominated care research. These insights are valuable, but not sufficient given that athletes are essential to the relationship, and should be afforded space to articulate their own care experiences and needs. Indeed, critical perspectives and alternative voices are warranted within care in coaching research. In response, this editorial begins by providing an overview of the extant research on care in coaching, before introducing six articles in this special issue. These articles advance our understanding by depicting the multifaceted ways that coaches can care and by amplifying the voice of athletes. The editorial also highlights 7 research questions in order that athlete-coach relationships can be informed by a substantial corpus of care research. Together the editorial and papers in this special issue provide a comprehensive addition to our existing understanding of care in coaching, which can inform future practice, policy and research.

## **Care in sport coaching; different perspectives and alternative voices**

Over a decade ago, Robyn Jones (2009 p.388) implored coaches to give athletes “our attention, our engrossment, our care: both on and off the field”. Developed from an auto-ethnographic analysis of his everyday coaching experience, this call was reinforced by the wider literature of the time, which documented controlling and / or abusive practices in sport coaching (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2006; Gearity, 2012; Raakman, Dorsh, & Rhind, 2010). Over the subsequent decade, *Sports Coaching Review* published accounts of how care can be enacted in sport coaching contexts. For instance, articles demonstrate how coaches may care by taking reasonable steps to prevent harm occurring to athletes (Partington, 2017), through simple acts such as listening and scheduling opportunities to ‘get to know’ athletes (Dohsten, Barker-Ruchti, & Lindgren, 2020), or through advocating for athletes and using the latest scientific protocols to support them (Cronin, Knowles, & Enright, 2020). These studies support Cronin and Armour’s (2018) proposition that care is an essential aspect of the coaching role. They also illustrate a myriad of ways that care may manifest in coaching contexts. This plurality of care should not be surprising, because while all humans share common conditions (e.g., natality, mortality), there are different ways of being in an interpersonal world (Arendt, 1998). That is to say, there is no uniform nor universal way of being a caring coach. Rather care is indexed to the needs of an ‘other’ e.g., the athlete, within a given situation. To care, therefore, is to respond to the particular needs of a particular athlete, at a particular time. From this perspective, care is relational, and given the imperative for caring coaching identified by Jones (2009), it is worth further considering how coaches care, for whom, and how.

In terms of considering care, extant studies have often used coaches' reports to define the needs of athletes and authoritatively describe what actions are caring. For example, coaches have reported creating family type atmospheres within teams, meeting participants before and after coaching sessions, and adopting open door policies for communication (e.g., Fisher, Larsen, Bejar, & Shigeno, 2019; Cronin, Walsh, Quayle, Whittaker, & Whitehead, 2019; Annerstedt & Eva-Carin, 2014). Such actions may be well intentioned, evidenced based, and appropriate to the specific coaching context. Nonetheless, coach centric accounts, including my own (e.g., Cronin & Armour, 2018), potentially overlook the capacity for athletes to express their needs. This is problematic because through charisma and control, coaches can be powerful entities that paternalistically overshadow and undermine the rights of athletes. This can mean that those being 'cared for' have little agency to determine their own needs and influence the care relationship. Furthermore, coach centric accounts of care may undervalue the contributions of athletes by not recognising the importance of understanding as a basis for caring relationships. Indeed, empathetic attempts to '*stand in an athlete's shoes*', and listen to how athletes feel in a particular moment, are a precursor to building caring relationships where coaches and athletes work alongside each other. Therefore, to inform genuine caring relationships, where an athlete is supported and "free to be more fully himself (sic)" (Noddings, 2013, p. 73), there is a need for research that; a) critically considers the powerful in athletes' care relationships (e.g., coaches, managers and wider institutions); and b) listens to athletes (i.e., the cared for) express their own concerns, needs and aspirations.

To address the above theoretical and population gaps in the literature, this special issue, provides six papers that advance our understanding of care in sport coaching. The first two papers in this special issue critically reconsider existing ways in

which coaches, managers and wider systems support athlete care. They confront the social, political, and economic influences that currently shape athletes' care experiences, and consider alternatives that might support future athletes. Supplementing this work, in four further articles, researchers have undertaken the emotional labour of listening to athletes' experiences and supporting them to report on what care they need. These papers acknowledge the varied needs of athletes, as voiced by athletes themselves. Through these accounts, the special issue builds a pluralistic, relational, needs based and situated view of care.

To be specific, in the first paper in this special issue, Brian Gearity and colleagues problematize caring coaching. Drawing on Foucauldian concepts, the authors illuminate how care is conceived and reported by coaches. Their self-critical crystallisation of their own previous work on NCAA coaches in the US, challenges researchers and coaches to question the social structures that influence care in coaching. Related to this, the second paper in this study by Deborah Agnew and Shane Pill consider the care provided to professional Australian Football League (AFL) players as they transition out of the professional AFL system. Reporting on the perceptions of two managers, a coach, and a development manager, the authors illustrate how players' early induction into the football system as children, coupled with the different infrastructure between national and state leagues, necessitates care as players come towards the end of their careers. The authors shed light on the sporting and non-sporting needs of these individuals. From this perspective, they consider the systemic resources needed to support athletes.

The subsequent articles in the special issue explicitly explore the experiences of athletes. Firstly, Lori Gano-Overway reports on 'high school' athletes' experiences of care that 'made a difference'. Via narratives that were co-constructed with participants,

this article demonstrates the complexity of care (e.g., tough love). All eight narratives are transparently included as supplemental material, and these serve as resources that may help researchers and coach educators further explore care. Also exploring the complexity of caring for young athletes, Jørgen Kjær et al. recognise the wider social-ecological context that influences athlete development with a particular focus on parents and guardians. Through the accounts of 14 Swedish national team athletes from a range of sports, the authors illustrate how parental care may be a precursor to, supplement for, or replaced by, domain specific care provided by coaches. Morris and colleagues also explore domain specific care, by sharing insights from women who play rugby 7s. The study reports and reflects on the pragmatic (e.g., safety) and philosophical (e.g., meaningfulness) needs of these athletes and may prompt coaches and researchers in other contexts to do likewise. Finally, the special issue concludes with Lewis et al.'s study of UK women footballers' experiences of care. Once more, the voices of athletes are helpful in highlighting how coaches can develop a 'web of care'. The study also powerfully reports how female athletes have experienced inappropriate acts of touch, and 'superficial care' that is undermined by performance imperatives. Thus demonstrating the need for continuing work to make sport a caring context for athletes.

Across these articles it is important to note that a range of athletes' experiences (coaches/athletes, males/females), in different sporting contexts (e.g., team/individual, child/adult sport), situated in varied international environments (Sweden, UK, US, Australia) are explored. It is also important to note that the authors also inhabit different countries, range from early career researchers to established academics, and include male and female voices. This plurality of perspectives has introduced new theories and concepts to care research whilst also challenging existing practices. Indeed, I must thank all the authors and reviewers of the six of the papers for producing this

imaginative work. To be clear, the articles that follow are not imaginative in a frivolous, fantastical, nor unreal sense. Instead, the articles are grounded in an empathetic imagination that authentically considers what athletes might feel and need, while also asking to what extent coaches have met those needs. In so doing, the authors build upon the existing coach centric research by questioning prevailing structures and providing alternative voices, views and insights on the needs of athletes. They also prompt me to imagine more and new research questions including;

- What alternative theoretical perspectives could help us to better understand care in sport coaching?
- How do we influence and redesign systemic practices to develop more caring cultures in sport?
- How can we further question, define and explain concepts such as ‘tough love’, so that we can genuinely provide athletes with challenge and avoid ‘line crossing’?
- How can coaches, parents, and athletes work harmoniously to ensure appropriate care for athletes?
- What are the rights and needs of athletes who continue to be marginalised e.g., disabled athletes, and how can caring coaches support these individuals?
- How can coaches authentically care within wider social, economic and political contexts?
- How do we provide care, for those coaches, who undertake care labour?

Consistent with Jones’ (2009) initial call for more caring coaching, these questions should be addressed in time. For the moment however, I am grateful that Sports



Coaching Review have supported this special issue, which further establishes care as an essential aspect of sport coaching.

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