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 What do high performance football coaches need to know about the coach-athlete relationship? Implications for formal coach education

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Article

<u>What do high performance football coaches need to know about the coach-athlete relationship? Implications for formal coach education.</u>

<u>Abstract</u>

A high-quality coach-athlete (C-A) relationship improves athlete well-being and performance but has been underrepresented in formal coach education. Eleven football coaches, working in some of the highest profile positions in England, were interviewed. We investigate to what extent their formal coach education experiences influenced their understanding of the C-A relationship. We explore their perceptions of the knowledge, relating to the C-A relationship, that could be included in formal coach education courses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven coaches. Inductive reflexive thematic analysis generated the following five themes; (1) An incongruence between the importance of the C-A relationship and its prominence in coach education (2) Interpersonal competencies and a progressive approach to the C-A relationship (3) Understand the unique needs of high-performance athletes (4) Build a culture conducive to high quality C-A relationships. Findings demonstrate the C-A relationship is underrepresented in the main English FA Coaching Pathway and provides insights into the knowledge that could be incorporated into courses to meet the needs of coaches. Future research should explore the athlete's perspective, relating to the knowledge coaches require to develop high quality C-A relationships within high-performance football settings.

<u>Introduction</u>

The coach-athlete (C-A) relationship forms the basis of successful coaching (Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006). It is a bond in which emotions, thoughts and behaviours of the coach and the athlete are mutually and causally interconnected (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). High quality C-A relationships have been found to positively influence athletes' well-being (Gosai et al., 2023) and performance (Phillips et al., 2023). Research suggests that high performance coaches are characterised by their ability to develop and maintain high-quality relationships with the athletes they coach (Lara-Bercial & Mallet, 2016).

Jowett's (2005) 3C+1 model has been most significant in developing an understanding of this phenomenon. Jowett (2005) developed the model based on a series of qualitative studies (e.g., Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000) with athletes from a range of sports and a variety of nations. The model is influenced by the principles of social exchange theory and the core components are closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation. Closeness defines the emotional bond that exists between the dyad and is characterised by appreciation, trust, and respect. Commitment reflects their ability to maintain a healthy and longstanding relationship. Complementarity describes the interpersonal behaviours and the extent to which the coach and the athlete are responsive to each other's needs. Co-orientation is the extent to which both parties perceive the quality of the relationship in a similar manner. The 3C+1 model has been instrumental in advancing an understanding of the nature, characteristics, and importance of the C-A relationship.

Despite research enhancing the understanding of the C-A relationship and emphasising its importance, coach education courses have typically failed to provide sufficient coverage of this topic within their curriculum (Ferrar et al., 2018; Lefebvre et al., 2016). Newland et al. (2023) conducted a study focusing on how knowledge of the C-A relationship is developed within the English Football Association's (FA) Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) A and B License qualifications, which are the highest practical coaching courses within the pathway. The research analysed key course documents and carried out semi-structured interviews with highly experienced FA coach developers, who both deliver and design the courses. The C-A relationship was not meaningfully addressed within the courses, and where it was referred to, it was introduced in an implicit and superficial manner. In contrast, the C-A relationship was perceived, by coach developers, as an integral aspect of effective practice and was a key feature within the competency framework which was used to assess coaches (Newland et al., 2023). This research indicates that the C-A relationship is underrepresented within the context of performance-based football coach education in England.

Naturally, this leads us to question what content, relating to the C-A relationship, should be incorporated into these courses. Conceptual models such as the 3C+1 (Jowett, 2005) provide an excellent foundation to better understand the importance and characteristics of high-quality C-A relationships by explicitly detailing the nature of the psychological constructs which comprise the model. However, further research is needed to understand the knowledge and skills coaches require to develop high quality C-A relationships in specific coaching contexts. This is particularly relevant given previous research has been conducted with coaches and athletes from a range of sports and in a variety of coaching contexts (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). It is important to consider that the C-A relationship is highly contextualised and is shaped and influenced by the unique environment in which it exists, which is typified by specific characteristics, idiosyncrasies, and ambiguities (Wagstaff, 2021). The current research is firmly rooted in the high-performance footballing domain in England, with these environments typically characterised as volatile and ruthless (Champ et al., 2020). To date, there has been a lack of research that has focused on the C-A relationship in performance-based football environments in England. Therefore, to better understand the C-A relationship in this context, and the content that could be included in formal coach education, it is important to conduct research with those working in this unique domain. Particularly given that if coach education is to be effective, it should not be perceived by coaches as decontextualised and divorced from the realities of practice (Chapman et al., 2020). To that end, the current research captures the perceptions of a variety of high performing coaches currently working in professional youth development and first team footballing environments in both the men's and women's game in England. Exploring the perspectives of high-performance coaches is important as it provides insights into the challenges and struggles they face. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to learn from credible experts and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the practices of successful coaches, which could help inform coach development. Therefore, the research seeks to explore the following questions:

1. From the perspective of coaches who have completed their formal coach education in England, to what extent did formal coach education courses address the C-A relationship?

2. From the perspective of high-performance professional football coaches in England, what knowledge, related to the C-A relationship, is important and should be addressed in formal coach education courses?

Methods

Paradigm Positioning

The research is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm which assumes the perspectives of individuals are diverse and developed over time through interactions with cultural contexts (Patton, 2015). The research is also underpinned by epistemological constructivism which proposes that knowledge is both constructed and subjective. Consequently, a relativist ontology is emphasised. This presumes individual perceptions depend on interactions with varying sociocultural settings (Patton, 2015). Aligned with these paradigmatic assumptions, a qualitative instrumental design was selected to explore coaches' perspectives, meaning, and understanding relating to the C-A relationship (Stake, 1995)

Participants

Nine male and two female participants aged 31 to 62 (mean age=43, SD=7.73) of white British ethnicity were purposefully sampled (Table 1). Inclusion criteria required participants to have worked in a coaching role in one, or more, of the following environments for the last 10 years.

- First team in the men's English Premier League or Football League (top four divisions in England).

- Academy in the men's English Premier League or Football League (top four divisions in England).

- England men's national youth teams (U16s to U21s)

- First team in the Women's Super League one or two (top two divisions in England).

- Academy in the Women's Super League one or two (top two divisions in England).

- England women's national youth teams (U16s to U23s)

These are the environments for which the FA prepare coaches to work in after they have completed the most advanced practical qualifications within the English FA's coaching pathway. All coaches had taken their coaching qualifications through the English FA and, as a minimum requirement, completed the UEFA

A License. Participants were purposefully sampled to represent a broad range of roles within professional first team and youth development positions within the men's and women's game in England. This linked to the ontological and epistemological stance we adopted, as we wanted to explore the lived experience of coaches who were currently working in these roles and enable them to provide rich accounts of the realities of practice within these settings. We adopted the notion of informational power developed by Malterud et al. (2016). Therefore, due to the narrow focus of the research, highly selective sampling, and the significant levels of expertise amongst the coaches, a sample size of 11 coaches was initially deemed adequate.

Data Collection

Institutional ethical approval was provided prior to data collection. Semi-structured interviews were selected as an appropriate tool, given the paradigmatic positioning, to explore the reasoning and sense making of the participants (Archer, 2003). The semi-structured interview guide was shaped by the two key research questions and utilised open questions to engender rich responses from participants (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Because coach education has previously been described as divorced from the realities of practice (Chapman et al., 2020), to ascertain the knowledge, relating to the C-A relationship, that could be included in formal coach education courses, we believed it was important to frame discussions about formal coach education through the lens of the coaches' experiences and practice. Therefore, this section focused on the coaches' understanding of the C-A relationship, the importance they place on the C-A relationship, the role the C-A relationship plays in their day-to-day practice, the challenges they face concerning the C-A relationship and the knowledge they require to develop and maintain high quality C-A relationships. Throughout this section we asked the coaches to relate their experiences back to the knowledge that was deemed important for formal coach education to address. Placing the coach's experiences at the centre of the interview better ensured that content we proposed as important was authentic and appropriately represented the experiences and challenges of high performances coaches. An example of a question from this section was "How important is the C-A relationship in your daily practice?" a follow up included "What knowledge does coach education need to address to support coaches to develop high quality C-A

relationships?". In the second half of the interview, we explored coaches' own formal coach education experiences more deeply. The section of the interview focused on the coaches' experiences of developing knowledge of the C-A relationship through formal coach education, how well they had been prepared through their formal coach education experiences and what C-A relationship knowledge would have helped them perform more effectively. An example of a questions from this section was "Was the C-A relationship ever covered in coach education courses that you attended?" a follow up included "Can you tell me how well these formal coach education experiences prepared you to develop high quality relationships with athletes?".

We intended to spend an equal amount of time on each of the two sections, but this was also influenced by the nature of the responses of the participants. The semi-structured nature of the interview encouraged flexibility and enabled the interactions to diverge into other pertinent areas, dependent on the responses of the participants. In total 490 minutes (M=44.55, SD=15.78) of audio recorded interview data were collected. Interviews took place on video calling software. The unique benefits of using video conferencing tools have been outlined by Gray et al. (2020) who argue that participants may be more comfortable talking about highly personal issues, such as the C-A relationship, within the privacy of their own home. Accessibility of participants is also an important benefit. This is particularly relevant in the current research, as this approach proved effective when attempting to access interviews with high profile coaches, in very demanding roles, whose schedules may not have allowed for the travel requirements to complete interviews in person.

Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis process was selected based on its suitability for research rooted in social constructivism (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis model was used throughout the process. Progression through the stages was developed in a non-rigid manner, that included data familiarisation, coding, developing themes, refining themes, naming themes, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Initially, the recordings were transcribed verbatim, and a familiarisation process took place. This involved an immersion in the interview transcripts, by carefully reading and making notes on relevant extracts that could help answer the two key research questions. We then uploaded the transcripts into Nvivo12 pro (Lumivero) to effectively order and analyse the data. Once all relevant extracts were labelled, this enabled the generation of initial codes. Coding was carried out inductively, thereby being driven by the data and allowing the data to guide the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). From here, themes were subsequently developed from across the data by analysing and combining the relevant codes together. This involved identifying key passages that were interpreted to be linked by their shared meaning in relation to the two research questions. For example, the initial codes of 'managing conflict' 'listening', 'open communication' and 'regular communication' were combined to form the theme 'interpersonal competencies and a progressive approach to the C-A relationship'. This theme served to answer the second research question, which related to the knowledge coaches perceived to be important and could be incorporated into coach education. The content of each of the other main themes and subthemes were precisely captured by a concise phrase. In the writing up process pertinent data extracts were selected which exemplified the themes for the reader.

Braun and Clarke (2019) urge researchers to critically reflect on their own impact on the research process. In the interests of transparency, it is important to disclose the lead author's biography, in terms of coaching experience (10 years in performance domains) and qualifications (UEFA A License coach). The lead author has also worked alongside some of the participants in a coaching capacity. We hoped this would encourage rapport and trust and lead to a more honest and rich account from the participants (Greene, 2014). Given the paradigmatic positioning of the current research, we view meaning and knowledge to be contextually situated and, therefore, view researcher subjectivity as a resource for the research, rather than a threat to be controlled (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Prior to each interview commencing, the aims of the research were discussed whilst also assuring participants of confidentiality and anonymity.

Rigour

The work of Tracy and Hinrich (2017) was used to establish methodological rigour. The research is a worthy topic seeking to explore the potentially mis-understood and overlooked realities of coaching practice, within challenging and multi-faceted high-performance environments, to question commonly accepted practices in coach education. Rich rigour is demonstrated through the appropriateness of the interview sample alongside the number and length of interviews all being reported. Sincerity is demonstrated through honesty about the researcher's background, which are reported within the data collection section. Thick descriptions are used in the findings section to encourage credibility, enabling the readers to draw their own conclusions from the data, thereby encouraging resonance. Procedural ethics were ensured through gaining institutional ethical approval. The key research questions aligned to the selected research methods and shaped the key findings, thereby ensuring meaningful coherence throughout the paper.

Findings and discussion

There are four themes in this section. The first theme relates to the first research question and explores coaches' experiences of developing knowledge of the C-A relationship through formal coach education. The next three themes focus on the coaches' perspectives relating to the knowledge that could be included within formal coach education courses to support coaches to develop and maintain high quality C-A relationships within performance-based football environments. Such is the nature of the research, and the belief that coach education should support coaches and address the challenges they face in practice, coaches were asked to relate their answers, as much as possible, to their current role and real-life coaching experiences.

Theme 1 – An incongruence between the importance of the C-A relationship and its prominence in coach education

Coaches reflected on their experiences of coach education delivered by the English FA. Despite believing the C-A relationship was integral to their practice, they report little content pertaining to this

within the courses on the main coaching pathway. This was exemplified when coaches were asked to reflect on their experiences on FA UEFA B and A license courses.

> B licence zero, A licence zero [Did the C-A relationship feature?]. I'd say it was…I mean that might be deliberate, they may think that we don't need to cover that. (Jim)
>
> I would say the mainstream awards, the UEFA B and the UEFA A licence, I didn't get much from them in terms of player and coach relationship. (John)

The findings support previous research by Newland et al., (2023) who found the C-A relationship was not addressed in a meaningful manner on the UEFA A and B License courses. Newland et al., (2023) undertook interviews with coach developers and carried out a document analysis of key documents across both courses. None of the coach developers reported the C-A relationship as being formalised as a stand-alone workshop, the focus of a specific assignment or targeted formally within the teaching on the courses. Newland et al., (2023) concludes that although academic research has developed an understanding of the characteristics of high-quality C-A relationships, this research appears not to have made it to the front line of formal coach education in performance-based football in England. The findings of the current research add further evidence to the notion that the C-A relationship has not been given sufficient coverage within formal coach education (Ferrar et al., 2018; Lefebvre et al., 2016). This is despite all coaches within the current research believing that developing a strong understanding of the C-A relationship, along with the relevant knowledge and skills, was vital in their current role.

> For me, the coach-athlete relationship I think is at the heart of everything and doesn't get anywhere near as enough prominence in coach education as it should. (Andy)
>
> And in essence, that is… that is coaching. So if anyone defines what we do, it's exactly that. It's having an athlete-coach relationship that enables people within our system to thrive and achieve their potential. (Mike)
>
> It's huge, it's everything. If you don't have that relationship with the players, then you've got no chance of improving and helping them improve. If you don't strike up these relationships, then very

little is going to land with the players. There's got to be a total element of trust between the two of

you. (John)

Coaches described a misalignment between the importance of the C-A relationship and the extent to which it features on the main FA coaching pathway. Coaches reported that these courses adopted an intense focus on professional knowledge. However, we believe it should not be a question of either or with regards to the types of knowledge covered in coach education programmes. Highly developed professional knowledge is imperative (Bloom et al., 1999), particularly in performance-based environments (Newland et al., 2023) and should not be diluted to broaden the scope of courses, or result in courses losing prestige or being deemed easier to pass. However, the decontextualised nature of formal coach education is a long-standing challenge (Chapman et al., 2020). If formal coach education is to meet the needs of coaches, then it must be built on an understanding of the diverse knowledge required for coaches to operate effectively in performance-based environments (Côté & Gilbert, 2009)

Despite a lack of content relating to the C-A relationship in the UEFA B and A license qualifications, for those coaches who had completed it, the Advanced Youth Award (AYA) was deemed to be an important course in developing their knowledge in this regard. The AYA is a level 4 course with a specific focus on developing coaches working with young male players in boys' professional academies in England.

Then you get the Advanced Youth Award, which covers that player-coach relationship in depth. So you get a four-day social block, you get four-day psychological block, a four-day physical block, and then a four-day blending block, where you then stitch the technical into those four areas. But then you will go into a whole world of academia with regards social attachment theory and those types of aspects around how you interact with the person. You look at the teenage brain, you look at understanding how young people develop neurologically… so there's depth that they dive into in the Advanced Youth Award. But those courses are only accessible once you're in the roles [boys academy coaching role]. (Mike)

You do your UEFA A licence for football knowledge. You do a AYA for player relationships and

connection knowledge. (Jim)

Jim describes a compartmentalised approach to formal coach education. The UEFA B and A License provide the professional knowledge and the Advanced Youth Award offers a broader focus, particularly on the psycho-social elements of coaching and therefore covering content that would relate more closely to the C-A relationship. This was something that Mike was also keen to emphasise.

I know you mentioned the UEFA pathway to begin with the A's and the B's. But for me, there's a

misunderstanding then in what those courses are standardised and designed for. They're a test of

technical and tactical knowledge of the game and the principles of the game. So that's what they're

testing. They're not there to test your coaching holistic abilities. They're not there to develop the

person or the player, they're there to develop your tactical knowledge of the game. (Mike)

We believe the approach described by Jim and Mike may be problematic on a number of fronts. Firstly, whether the different types of coaching knowledge should be partly compartmentalised on different courses may be contrary to evidence which suggests professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge can be effectively developed in unison through formal coach education (Araya et al., 2015). This is particularly pertinent given it would take most coaches well over a decade to reach the AYA after starting their coaching journey. Secondly, the AYA is focused exclusively on the coaching of young male athletes in academy environments, suggesting the C-A relationship is only important in this context, which is contrary to research on the topic (Phillips et al., 2023). Lastly, and perhaps most concerning of all, it creates a two-tiered system of coach education. Coaches may simply choose not to complete the qualification and, most important of all, many coaches do not have access to the AYA qualification. This is because the qualification is only available to those working in the boy's game in a professional academy. That means those working in the high-performance female game or adult game, have no access. Even within the sample of coaches, all of whom are working in the most high-profile coaching roles in England, many had been unable to access the AYA qualification. This had led them to feel they were less prepared for the

requirements demanded in high-performance coaching environments than would otherwise have been the case.

> In a way, you've probably been failed as a coach, because you haven't been given the essentials, and probably the prereqs [prerequisites] that you're required as a coach to actually go and perform any job. They'll actually give us the technical and tactical knowledge or parts of that. But have dismissed the other side of the game, which is really important. (Ron)

Given that the C-A relationship is an essential aspect of practice for coaches working in all high-performance environments, regardless of the gender or age of the athletes (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016), it would be imperative that the C-A relationship be integrated within the main coaching pathway on UEFA B and A license qualifications. These are, after all, the core gateway qualifications accessible to all coaches seeking to work within performance-based settings. Failure to integrate the C-A relationship risks creating a lottery for coaches based on what formal education opportunities they are able to access, subject to the gender and age of the athletes with whom they are working. This could result in some being left to develop this element of their practice in an exclusively unmediated manner, which has been the experience of many of the coaches we interviewed. These findings naturally lead us to the second research question which focuses on what knowledge could be included within formal coach education courses to support coaches to develop and maintain high quality C-A relationships, within performance based professional football environments. The findings are presented in the next three themes.

Theme 2 – Interpersonal competencies and a progressive approach to the C-A relationship

Coaches described the evolving nature of the C-A relationship and the importance of adopting a progressive approach to meet the needs of the modern-day athlete. Coaches identified effective communication as a key enabling factor in the development of high-quality C-A relationships. They recognised the ability to observe the behaviour of athletes as integral in informing this communication. Communicating with empathy, which was underpinned by well-developed listening skills was perceived to be critical. Coaches deemed conflict inevitable within the high-performance environment, with deselection

identified as an important pre-cursor to conflict. However, effective communication and feedback was perceived to be a mediating factor to ensure that conflict could be effectively resolved. Throughout the theme coaches were asked to exemplify their thoughts and perceptions with examples from their lived experiences.

Observation, communication, listening skills and empathy

Well-developed observation skills, alongside the art of noticing, were deemed as critical factors which underpinned effective communication. John believed this was a topic worthy of focus within coach education courses. He illustrated how these skills influenced his practice.

> The importance of watching like a hawk all the time [what should coaches learn?]. So, we're fortunate we have a big gym, and they all would congregate in the gym in the morning, they go through their pre-activation. I watch relationships or watch for people that are isolated and watch for changing behaviours in people. I've just got my eye on them all the time. And you can sense once you get to know them, you can sense those suddenly going through a bit of a tough time or isolating themselves. And I make an effort to get around to every player every morning and just ask how they are? 'Are they okay?' Once again, most of the time - 99% of the time - is a high five and a hug and everything's fine, there's no problem. But every now and then you get one that maybe avoids eye contact or something that gives you a little feel that there's something not quite right. (John)

Jones et al. (2013) draws on the work of Mason (2002) and positions noticing as the basis of coaching action and one that could be seen as a purposeful and powerful development tool for practitioners. The quality of the observations often "distinguishes the ordinary coaches from the really good ones" with the most competent coaches "really capable of seeing what is going on both on and off the court" (Ronglan & Havang, 2011, p. 92). However, coaches need to understand what to look for and how this could influence their actions and behaviours. Previous research suggests that the noticing of technical and tactical nuances

of performance is, quite rightly, well established within football-based formal coach education (Newland et al., 2023). However, John emphasises the importance of noticing the athletes' behaviours more generally and in a wide variety of contexts. He observes for changes in behaviours, such as how athletes relate to one another, or may be isolating themselves from others. In this regard, coach education could support coaches to understand how observation and noticing can help the coach be responsive to the needs of the athlete and thereby strengthen the C-A relationship. This would require coaches to reflect on their own coaching context, the situations in which noticing may be important and how this could influence their communication and interactions with athletes.

Coaches described how these observation skills, along with an appreciation of the importance of empathy, should drive the communication between the coach and athlete. Andy provided an example of what this may look like in practice.

> So last night, we had a game, we got beat in the cup two one. One of the lads who was sub, who didn't get on, he was fuming. They would normally do some box to box runs at the end if they didn't play. I ran with him to talk about what he was thinking, what he was feeling, what he was going to do next. So that wasn't technical or tactical, putting down cones, you know, there was none of that. But that for me was coach-athlete relationship stuff. Trying to make sure that he was okay. Trying to understand how he felt, trying to understand what he was going to do about it, and manage that moment in a way that was helpful for him and helpful for the team. (Andy)

Andy's empathetic approach, and his ability to notice an appropriate opportunity to engage with the athlete, provides the foundations for effective coach-athlete communication. Given the relational nature of coaching, the interpersonal competencies of high-performance coaches are imperative (Lara-Bercial & Mallet, 2016). Effective communication strategies, such as that used by Andy, which focus on support, motivation, and conflict management play a significant role in the development of high-quality C-A relationships (Davis et al., 2019). Coaches believed it was of fundamental importance that coach education

supported coaches to reflect upon how, where, and when to initiate these conversations and how to ensure the coach's approach is underpinned by well-developed listening skills and an empathetic approach.

> And whilst they are speaking, you've got to show empathy. That's really key. You're going to have to really listen to them whilst they talk and you've got to gather information from them and then reflect on what they're saying. Then try and direct them along the path of what's the right way for them. So, it's all about your listening skills, I think, and then how you communicate back with what you're hearing. (Rachel)

Rachel describes utilising techniques drawn from counselling and therapeutic practices. She emphasises the importance of reflective listening, which focuses on providing sharp attention to the individual's statements to infer underlying meaning (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). She also emphasises the notion of accurate empathy, which refers to the sincere desire to understand the individual's experiences and needs (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). That is not to say that these interactions were always characterised by gentler, more supportive approaches, with coaches also reporting that they provided challenging and probing responses, where appropriate. However, coaches believed it was important for formal coach education to support coaches to better understand how to utilise strategies, such as these, to support effective interpersonal communication with athletes.

Managing conflict

Coaches perceived conflict with athletes to be inevitable and believed it was essential that coach education approached this topic in a meaningful manner. This is unsurprising given previous research has characterised performance-based footballing environments as highly competitive (Potrac et al., 2012) and shaped by micropolitics (Thomson et al., 2015). A key challenge faced by coaches, which is particularly pertinent in team sports such as football, is that of deselection, which can be a pre-cursor for coach-athlete conflict (Slade et al., 2024).

> Like I said to you, until probably February time, I was able to support those first team players [who weren't playing regularly] with player development plans, you know, we're going to support you

with this, we'll do clips. But they get to a point where they don't give a shit what you can give them, they just want to play. So, then it's managing them when they're disgruntled. I felt like I fucking got the graveyard shift here because every week I've got the same players [to coach] who aren't starting and I'm asking them this week to play like Chelsea, today like Man City [in matchday preparation sessions], and it gets harder and again, if you don't have that relationship with those players, they don't want to do it. (Susan)

Susan describes an inevitability relating to the athlete's growing frustrations if they are not selected to play in matches over a prolonged period of time. However, she also explains how high-quality relationship with the athlete can help support athletes through potential conflict situations, such as deselection. Initially, she describes effectively adopting a task orientated approach to supporting the athlete, which focused on practical solutions and feedback and required a combination of interpersonal and professional knowledge (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Coaches believed it was essential that coach education supported coaches to reflect on ways in which they could empathise with athletes, but, also, use video clips and objective data, to exemplify the reasons the athlete was not being selected and, subsequently, support one to one coaching and individualised feedback sessions. This not only developed a sense of individualised support and care for the athlete, but, also, enabled the athlete to have clear and objective aims to work towards, thereby potentially decreasing the likelihood of deselection having an erosive effect on the C-A relationship.

Several coaches reported that coach education could support coaches to develop a strong understanding of the evolving nature of the C-A relationship, which could impact on the nature of their communication during times of potential conflict.

Coaches have got to be a lot more aware of how you do things, when you do things and how you approach certain situations. Compared to previously, I might just have gone straight in and gone, 'No, that's wrong, they can't do that'. You've probably lost four or five players, and you're probably getting told off because of the tone you've used. Whereas now I'm more aware to go, I need to take a step back and approach it in this way. Be aware of the consequences, and the impact

I can have if I do it well. And that's why I think I have totally changed compared to what I used to be like. It's not as direct, it's a lot more question and answer, sit in and have a conversation and come to a solution and find solutions rather than just being me conducting the orchestra and just going bang, bang, bang. Yeah, it doesn't work anymore. (Ron)

The importance of the coach operating as a mediator by engaging in frequent communication, shared decision making, and diplomacy aligns with previous research which focused on effective conflict prevention strategies used by coaches (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Coaches need to develop intrapersonal skills that enable them to down-regulate their emotions and respond in a measured and thoughtful manner (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Ron's comments resonated with the work of Ferrar et al. (2018) who described how coach's approach to coaching, and the C-A relationship, must adapt to meet the evolving needs, values and expectations of the modern athlete. However, the coach should act decisively when required (Lara-Bercial, & Mallet, 2016), particularly relating to examples of behaviour misconduct by athletes. Here, coaches could use their authority where definitive action may be needed (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Nevertheless, coaches must understand that every generation brings a unique set of characteristics, behaviours, challenges and needs to the workplace (Schroth, 2019) which is shaped by a myriad of cultural and environmental factors. Coaching is no different (Gould et al., 2020) and high-performance football cannot, and should not, operate in a bubble – perceiving itself exempt from the changes and evolution of wider society. Coaches believed that coach education could support coaches to adopt a modern and progressive approach to developing high quality relationships with athletes, and not become over reliant on exploiting power imbalances by adopting a traditional autocratic approach.

Theme 3 - Understand the unique needs of high-performance athletes

Understanding and meeting the unique and diverse needs of high-performance athletes was identified as a key competency for coach education to consider when developing coaches' proficiencies relative to the C-A relationship. Coaches highlighted the importance of understanding the different types of C-A relationships that may prove optimum for different athletes, whilst also developing relationships that

enabled the coach to provide high levels of challenge. Coaches also emphasised the importance of having well developed professional knowledge, which helped strengthen the C-A relationship, particularly within a high-performance context.

Understanding the different types of relationships

The importance of coaches gaining a comprehensive understanding of athletes as holistic individuals, including the contextual factors that impact their broader lives beyond their athletic identity, has been well documented (Davis & Jowett, 2014), and the present findings reinforce this notion. Coaches believed this was important to meet the potentially complex and multifaceted needs of these individuals. Examples included appreciating the importance and influence of the athlete's biography, nationality, religion, family dynamics, support network, motivations, goals, and mental health. Coaches believed these factors were inextricably linked to performance on the pitch. However, Mike was keen to paint a more nuanced picture regarding the unique nature of such relationships, believing it was important that coach education supports coaches to develop an understanding of the various types of C-A relationships that exist in performance-based footballing settings.

> Not everyone wants to open up, not everyone wants to have those types of relationships. People potentially just want to come to work, get the job done and move on. And that's okay. Like I say, it only becomes a problem when it becomes misaligned. (Mike)

Jowett (2007) captures this notion of an alignment of expectations between athlete and coach in the 3C+1 model, within the concept of co-orientation which refers to how the athlete and coach's perceptions of the relationship are interconnected. Mike argues there may be optimal characteristics, within relationships, that enable both the athlete and coach to thrive, but that they will be different for each athlete. Mike believes coaches must move away from the notion of a 'one size fits all' relationship. The relationship should be shaped by the needs of the athlete, which are, naturally, all different.

Mike provided more detail on the different types of C-A relationship that he believed coaches needed to better understand and navigate to become more effective in practice.

So, I talked about the potential energy that you need to invest in a relationship to get a certain type of trust that you're getting back. So, I've got four definitions that I talk to our coaches about [within in-house coach development sessions at his club]. I've got a parasitic relationship, service level provider, professional and family as the four layers. And in essence, it's about me knowing the type of relationship that I'm going to have with that person on one of those definitions. But then it goes to the type of energy that I've got to invest and potentially the type of energy that's going to get mirrored back to me. And I think if you get that clarity that you potentially don't get the misalignment and the frustrations. Coaches need to understand the level of energy you've got to put into it. But also the level of energy they're prepared to expect back. (Mike)

Mike references four different relationship types and these are based on his vast experience working with athletes, in high performance environments, over several decades. This resonates with the work of Jowett (2005) who used a taxonomy to describe the C-A relationship based on its effectiveness and success. In successful C-A relationships, there is a focus on personal development and satisfaction through empathy, honesty, and encouragement. Ineffective C-A relationships, in contrast, are characterised by an increased remoteness, lack of empathy or even abuse. Successful C-A relationships are those that have achieved performance success, whereas unsuccessful relationships do not realise their performance goals. The usefulness of taxonomies may be limited by their propensity to oversimplify complex phenomenon. However, this resonates with Mike's comments, for example, some athletes may not need the same level of interpersonal liking, captured in the construct of closeness in the 3C+1 model, to achieve success and instead mutual trust and respect may take precedent for some athletes. That is not to demean the importance of the C-A relationship, but, rather, to emphasise its personalised nature. This requires the coach to understand this, and manage their expectations for the relationship appropriately. However, Mike's model is, not necessarily, based on, or underpinned by, rigorous evidence or empirical research. Bailey et al. (2018) describes how, due to the pressures of competitive success, coaches are continually searching for new and advantageous methods to develop and improve athletes and, in this case, other coaches. Indeed, Mike spoke about using this model to deliver staff training for coaches at his current Premier League club. However,

this pressure may increase their vulnerability to pseudoscientific ideas. Given previous findings (Newland at al., 2023), we postulate that this may be the result of coach education failing to provide sufficient information to coaches regarding topics such as the C-A relationship, which, in turn, may mean that coaches, through their own ingenuity, develop their own theories. It is important that coach education supports coaches, with research informed information, enabling them to build their own ideas from a robust evidence base.

Developing relationships rooted in high challenge

Coaches described how C-A relationships that enabled coaches to provide elevated levels of challenge were essential for performance-based environments to be successful, whether that be in producing professional athletes in talent development settings or results in first team environments. Jack reflected on this within the women's national team environment.

> We're striving for the endpoint; it's about being world champions. So, coaches have to know how to keep pushing it, we have to keep saying this is good, but it can be better, like this is the next step. So, there is a bit of inevitability of high expectations. There is no hiding from that and actually I think that's probably a quality through all of our work is to nurture and guide players through our pathway. There is an inevitability that some players just aren't okay with that high challenge, it's not something they're comfortable with (Jack)

Although Jack is keen to emphasise the importance of coaches having a relationship with their athletes that is rooted in high levels of challenge, he also focuses on the importance of nurturing and guiding. High quality C-A relationships have the potential to help pave the way for increased levels of challenge (Jowett & Felton, 2024). Within the high-performance domain, the coach will be required to deliver critical feedback, make difficult decisions and be highly demanding. High performance athletes often expect these elevated levels of challenge, but a high-quality C-A relationship may help mediate this by ensuring it is delivered in a caring, sustainable and ethical manner, where the coach's strong understanding of the individual athlete, enables them to increase challenge in an effective and appropriate manner.

Coaches further illuminated and demystified the ways in which they ensured that high levels of challenge were an integral part of the C-A relationship.

For me, whenever I'm working with players I think first of all, I want the absolute best for them. And I think quite often, because of experience, coaches generally have a much better idea of what that looks like than the player. You know, they have the dream, but do they have the habits to try and give them the best possible chance of achieving the dream? But I think coaches have got to …you've got to understand them, you've got to work out quickly what type of character they are. What drives them? What motivates them? Where do they sit socially in the group? I think it's always quite interesting in terms of their own ego, or their own self-awareness and insecurities because that can play a big part in the day to day of developing players, and also their backgrounds. You know, the family and you know, how many clubs have they been at? What's their history? Academy wise, football wise, training wise, injury wise, and just get to know them really. And I think when they understand and feel that, this is well documented, you know, when you actually care about them, you're passionate about developing them, and they can feel that you're committing a huge part of your life sacrificing family time and stuff like that to really invest in them. But coaches have to understand it means you're going to push them. If I'm doing that as a coach and investing that time and making sacrifices to try and be the best that I can be, maybe me being the best I can be, is making the players the best they can be or helping them to understand what that looks like. So, pushing them really hard is a key part of that. And you have to build that and develop an understanding that I'm there to help them become what they want to become. (Gordon)

Gordon emphasises the importance of challenging athletes. He highlights the critical role of the coach's expertise and experience in deciphering the nature and level of this challenge. However, he also underscores the necessity of providing space for the athlete to be understood. Gordon's response resonated with the work of Cronin and Armour (2018), who use Noddings' (1988) theory of care to explore the role of the coach in developing nurturing and caring relationships with athletes. A caring approach is underpinned by the 'carer' meeting the needs of the 'cared for', in this case the athlete (Cronin, 2023). In a high-performance

context, athletes require elevated levels of challenge to meet their needs, progress and achieve performance success. However, Noddings (2002) differentiates between 'expressed' and 'inferred' needs, which resonates with the description Gordon provides. Within a coaching context, the former is directly asked for by the athlete, the latter is assumed by the coach. By using this notion of 'inferred' and 'expressed' needs, it provides a basis upon which coaches can better understand how to provide increased levels of challenge in a dialogic and democratic manner. Therefore, coach education could support coaches to reflect upon how they provide high levels of challenge by drawing on their own expertise, combined with methods by which to capture the expressed needs of the athlete, to ensure high quality C-A relationships help facilitate the significant levels of challenge required in the high-performance domain.

High levels of professional knowledge

When coaches were asked about the knowledge, within coach education courses, that would support them to develop and maintain high quality C-A relationships within performance based professional football environments, professional knowledge was a key theme. Although this may appear contrary to the focus of the paper, this was also a key finding in our previous study (Newland et al., 2023) and one we believe is important to re-iterate.

> We had a coach, Andy. He's a Head of Performance now, he's like a sports scientist. But as they do, they tend to drift into the coaching side. Early in Craig's [first team manager] tenure here with us he was doing part of the coaching and then he started doing some of the defending work, tactically a little bit. And he just got absolutely annihilated, like annihilated. After the first week he'd been in, the players were into Craig [first team manager] and just like 'he doesn't coach us again'. Every time they said 'I don't think that works' or 'this is what we think' he didn't have an answer to go well 'I'm doing it because of this'. He didn't enable himself to back it up, so you've now not built any trust with those players, because they don't think you know enough. (Ron)

Potrac et al. (2002) utilised the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman, using the notion of 'the presentation of the self' to understand the coaching practice of a high-performance English football coach. Ron's comments resonate with the findings of Potrac et al. (2002), with high performance athletes depicted as

extremely demanding of the coach. In this sense, the notion of 'high challenge', in performance-based contexts, may work in both directions of the dyad. Potrac et al. (2002) describes how the coach's behaviours was shaped by the perceived need to develop high quality relationships with the athletes. This required the coach to demonstrate proficiency in terms of their professional knowledge to garner the respect of the athletes. Ron describes how coaches must have well developed professional knowledge to preserve and strengthen the C-A relationship, otherwise they risk being perceived, by the athlete, as being unable to help them thrive and progress. Therefore, performance-based coach education, in the process of broadening its outlook, should not seek to dilute expectations relating to the standards of professional knowledge expected from coaches to be deemed appropriate to pass the courses. Otherwise, situations, such as the one described by Ron, will hinder coaches in their ability to develop and maintain high quality C-A relationships. The findings, therefore, move us away from a dichotomised approach, which presents professional knowledge and relationship building skills as separate, to one that positions professional knowledge as central to the C-A relationship in the performance domain.

Theme 4 – Build a culture conducive to high quality C-A relationships

Coaches identified their ability to influence the culture of the working environment to be of critical importance to enable high quality C-A relationships to thrive. Research has been criticised for focusing on this C-A relationship in isolation and, thereby, ignoring many of the wider contextual factors that would influence it (Wagstaff, 2021). Indeed, Wagstaff (2021) argues that the C-A relationship does not operate in a bubble. He rejects Jowett's (2017) notion that the success of coaching resides simply in the coach and the athlete and the relationship they develop. We concur that the C-A relationship does not operate independently from the wider culture it functions within. By accepting this, the role of the coach becomes even more pertinent, as they must understand how to influence and shape a supportive coaching climate through a web of caring relationships (Cronin et al., 2018). This is not to present this endeavour as a simplistic and unproblematic one, or to naively suggest that coaches have control over all facets of the culture within the environments that they operate, particularly when sports organisations are vulnerable to

evolving and conflicting motivations, ideologies, and goals of the individuals within them (Thomson et al., 2015). However, the sociocultural dimension is pertinent given its impact on the C-A relationship (Wagstaff, 2021) and that football-based coach education programmes have been accused of failing to prepare coaches to deal with the complex political and emotional realities of working with others in these contexts (Gibson & Groom, 2018)

Communicating and co-constructing expectations

Coaches recognised that a successful culture, which assisted the development of high-quality C-A relationships, started with the coach understanding how to effectively communicate and co-construct a vision, including expectations and objectives for coaches, athletes and the wider team of staff. This was described by Susan.

It comes [high quality C-A relationships] from a collective understanding of what we accept and what we don't accept. Coaches have to very much set it out in pre-season. When we went on pre-season tour last season, it was very much around, well, what do we want to do this season? What is success this season? And as a group collectively, what do we want to achieve? And it was like, right, we want to achieve this, this and this, they're great. So, if we want to achieve this, this and this, what are the behaviours, as a group, that we need to show every day? (Susan)

Research which has adopted a sociological lens has sought to better understand the ambiguity and complexity of organisational life within professional sports settings (Jones et al., 2013). The metaphor of orchestration, drawn from research focusing on managing change in educational institutions (Wallace, 2004) has been used to explain the complex and dynamic nature of coaching practice (Jones et al., 2013). Gibson and Groom (2018) used the notion of orchestration to explore the practices of an Academy Manager in an English Premier League club. Similarly to Susan, they reported the importance of the coach's ability to communicate an overarching vision for the club, particularly given the contradictory goals and expectations that exist within sporting organisations (Jones & Wallace, 2006). Susan identifies pre-season as a key strategic period to carry out the preparatory work, that will better enable a collective understanding

and agreement of the type and nature of the behaviours that will underpin all relationships, but particularly that of the C-A relationship. The notion of establishing rules to pre-empt conflict and facilitate high quality C-A relationships is well established (Jowett & Carpenter, 2015). However, of paramount importance is the coach's ability to forge a culture of acceptance for their vision (Gibson & Groom, 2018). To encourage this, Andy believed the athlete could adopt an active role in shaping the culture.

> I will probably say that that's co-created. So, the values and behaviours that us as a collective-players, staff etc, I would say they're co-created as a group, and then the real strength and power comes when the players hold each other accountable to them. But you still have a framework that you operate in and people know what's acceptable and what's not acceptable. (Andy)

The degree to which the athlete's voice shapes these early interactions, may, to an extent, depend on contextual factors and the individual preferences of the coach. This was perceived by coaches as a complex act, by which they had to foster a sense of authority whilst also demonstrating a democratic approach. Coaches emphasised that this process of outlining and sharing expectations was utilised to develop clearly defined expectations for coaches, athletes and staff which would better ensure transparency and accountability, which was deemed as conducive to developing high quality C-A relationships.

Integrating meaningful athlete leadership

Central to cultivating high-quality C-A relationships, was developing a culture that ensured athletes can communicate their thoughts and feelings clearly and regularly to the coaching team. To formally integrate this into the culture, leadership groups were perceived to be an effective strategy to facilitate this process. Coaches described leadership groups that were usually made up of between four and six individuals. Coaches conveyed the importance of the leadership team being representative of the whole squad in terms of capturing perspectives from different social groups, age groups, nationalities and ethnicities. Gordon expanded on the role of leadership groups.

> "If I was concerned about another player, sometimes I'd put it to the leadership group and say, 'How's Billy? Is he alright? He didn't seem himself this morning.' Or, yesterday, there was an issue with this, 'Is everything alright? Anything going on there in the changing room?' They might say

'he's had a nightmare with his Mrs' and then you just pick him off [speak one to one]. 'Everything alright?' If he wants to go into it, he would. So, there are different ways of doing it. But you do consciously sort of plan to have these two or three conversations." (Gordon)

Gordon explains how the leadership team operate as external leaders in that they provided a link between the squad and the coaching and management team, but this also had a social function to promote positive relationships between the athlete and coach (Fransen et al., 2014). Gordon describes how athlete leadership enabled him to gain a better understanding of the contextual factors impacting individuals within the squad and support the development of an environment that encourages open communication, athlete voice and high-quality C-A relationships. For this to be effective, coaches must develop a culture that educates, empowers and encourages athletes to speak up, in ways that are honest and candid. However, in return, athletes should communicate in a manner that is respectful and appropriate. Therefore, the athletes' interpersonal knowledge and skills, and not just that of coaches, are significant for the development of high quality C-A relationships (Jowett et al., 2023).

Such was the importance coaches placed on athlete leadership, Rachel describes how meetings with the leadership team are formally planned into their weekly programme.

We've got five people now in our leadership group. They meet every matchday minus one with myself and Jane (first team manager). We have a coffee and they will have three things that they want to bring up and it may be like 'we all feel really tired we haven't had a day off last week because we were in for recovery after the game' and we will listen and sometimes we will go, 'do you know what, we will actually give you a day off here because we agree'. But then we'll give them targets that we want them to do and it may be something simple like we've noticed that people, or it's been fed back into us, that people are going into the gym with coffees ,for example, something as simple as that. Like you spoke about taking care of our building so if you see somebody in with a coffee like it's your duty to make sure you police it and they're like 'yeah okay we'll be on it' and stuff like that really, little things. (Rachel)

Rachel describes a relational approach to these meetings that are built upon a shared understanding and empathy from both parties. However, the objectives of the meeting were also to hold athletes to high standards with regards to their behaviours and conduct. Specifically related to the C-A relationship was the idea that members of the leadership group could be used to 'self-police' behaviours and attitudes that were deemed not to be in keeping with the desired standards previously agreed. This is not to say that coaches were unwilling to have difficult conversations, which challenged athletes, if behaviours were deemed inappropriate. However, Rachel believed this process of empowering the athletes to hold each to account could positively influence the C-A relationship, as this 'outsourcing' meant coaches may not, necessarily, have to conduct these conversations with individuals which could risk eroding the quality of the C-A relationship. Rachel describes how coach education could also support coaches to understand how to utilise the power of athlete leadership, to strengthen the overall culture, thereby having a potentially preventative impact on conflict between athlete and coach.

The role of the coaching and multidisciplinary team

Coaches believed that the substantial technical coaching team typical of high-performance footballing environments, were integral to developing a caring coaching climate, that would enable C-A relationships to thrive. Depending on the context and club, there are a variety of roles adopted by coaches, for example, manager, assistant manager, head coach, assistant coach and specialist coach (e.g., goalkeeper or set pieces). It was important coaches understood how to complement one another and how their role may influence the relationship they develop to support and meet the needs of a large and diverse squad of athletes. This was articulated by Ron who is a first team assistant coach.

> My relationship with the players is slightly different [from the first team manager]. They're more likely going to come to me at times when they're not playing and ask why they're not playing and what do I need to do? Because going to your manager and asking that can be probably a bit tough. So, my role is different in that way, they'll approach me differently. A lot of them do come to me

for a lot of feedback, as I said, review of games, review of training, wanting individual work, a lot of them do come to me for that and I understand why because of my position. (Ron)

When I first came in, the manager was going to let Emma Jones [pseudonym for current England international player] go the first year I was there due to attitude and her…I wouldn't say a poor mentality it's more her mentality to deal with difficult situations. But I spent time investing time in her to understand what were the reasons why she was always frustrated and she wasn't able to lose that in certain moments in a game. Training she was fine, but then building that relationship to understand where she wants to go, how we can work together to establish some sort of process that would enable her to switch off in those moments, she was getting frustrated, or there was a small process which enabled her to calm back down. I built that over the last probably two to three years working with her now. And I think I have a good understanding of what she needs at certain moments when she needs an arm [support], when she doesn't and when she needs putting in line[challenge]. (Ron)

Since his intervention, the player Ron is referring to has developed into a high performer for both her club and on the international stage for her country. Ron emphasises the importance of the coach's ability to regulate their emotional response dependent on the athlete's needs. However, the notion that the head coach or first team manager, can develop and maintain high quality relationships with all individuals within a squad, may be unrealistic and could place an impractical burden on the coach (Cronin et al., 2018). Particularly when emotional labour has been linked to psychological distress and burnout for the coach (Potrac et al., 2017). Much of the research pertaining to the C-A relationship has not deciphered between the different coaching roles within performance-based contexts and we would encourage future research to explore this further. Meanwhile, coach education could support coaches to develop a strong understanding of the different coaching roles within performance-based environments, and how this may impact their relationships with athletes. That includes understanding the characteristics and competencies of individuals within their technical coaching team and empowering them to develop impactful relationships with individual members of the squad.

High performance football is also somewhat unique in the size of the multi-disciplinary teams (MDT) that work alongside athletes. These include practitioners who specialise in physiology and sports science, analysis, psychology and player welfare and care. Mike believed coaches should understand how to work effectively with the MDT, within the parameters of ethical guidelines and confidentiality, to develop a collegiate culture that would support the development of high-quality C-A relationships.

> But you know, one of the things I did recently was bring as many of the MDT staff into one office as I possibly could because walls become barriers in terms of sharing. So, bringing everyone into the same office meant that even then simple conversations you have every day, get around the entire office and just keeps everybody in the loop. So, I think it's important for us in the way that we want to work [developing high quality C-A relationships] that we share information on players and relationships that we're having. Obviously, there's some stuff that can't be shared. There's some stuff that's going to be confidential along the way. But as much as possible, if you know if we're working on or I've been working on something with a particular player, I'll share that with the other staff so that they're in the loop and whenever they're working with them, they can bring them things forward as well. (Mike)

Mike moves beyond thinking about the C-A relationship in isolation, reflecting on its connections to a broader system that comprises of individuals, dyads, teams, and departments (Wagstaff, 2021). Cronin et al. (2018) emphasises the importance of the multidisciplinary nature of 'gold standard' caring coaching climates, which adeptly establish a 'web of care' around athletes (p.95). Therefore, the coach's role is to skilfully build alliances, exert influence and attempt to unify individuals behind these strategic goals (Potrac & Jones, 2009), which, in this regard, is to ensure effective collaboration between staff to facilitate high quality C-A relationships. This enables the coach to draw on a wide variety of expertise, with each practitioner having their own unique perceptions and understanding of the individual athlete. This exchange of information could enhance the coach's decision making, behaviours and interactions with the athlete, enabling them to better address the athlete's needs and strengthen the C-A relationship.

Strength and Limitations

We captured the perceptions of high-performance coaches working in some of the most prestigious and important roles in English football. We believe this to be a strength of the research as gaining access to these practitioners is typically difficult. Coaches were also working in a range of roles in the men's and women's game and across youth development and first team environments, which gave us a variety of perspectives that will have been shaped by these contextual factors. However, we do accept that the participants views may not be representative of all coaches currently working within performance-based settings in England. We also recognise that the sample does not demonstrate diversity in relation to race, ethnicity, or sex and this is a limitation of the research. This is, at least in part, due to the overrepresentation of white British males in both the men's and women's professional game in England. Lastly, it would be remiss of us not to highlight the importance of the athlete's voice in the process of shaping coach education content, particularly as they are one half of the coach-athlete dyad. This viewpoint is missing from the current research and, as such, is a limitation of the work.

Conclusion

Formal coach education courses have typically failed to provide sufficient coverage of C-A relationship within their curriculum (Ferrar et al., 2018; Lefebvre et al., 2016) Indeed, Newland et al. (2023) found the C-A relationship was delivered in a superficial manner in the English FA's UEFA A and B License qualifications. The key findings provide further evidence that the C-A relationship is underrepresented in formal coach education. However, further research is required to assess whether this is also the case across other sports and national governing bodies. We found high performance coaches perceived developing a strong understanding of the C-A relationship is integral to their current role. This points to an incongruence between its importance and the extent to which it features in formal coach education. Therefore, we conclude that the C-A relationship should be given greater prominence in coach education curricula.

Given we have interviewed a relatively small number of coaches, who described what they perceive to be important in their context, we understand that these approaches may not transfer effectively to other coaching settings or that some of the ideas expressed by coaches may not necessarily be evidenced based.

However, these coaches are both practitioners and credible experts and are therefore uniquely placed to inform the research which provides a starting point by which to understand the content that could be included in courses to support coaches to develop high quality C-A relationships in performance-based settings. Supporting the findings of previous research, coaches reported that it was essential that coach education supported the development of a progressive understanding of the C-A relationship underpinned by effective interpersonal competencies and communication skills (Davis et al., 2019). Observational skills and the art of noticing (Jones et al., 2013) were deemed imperative, alongside the importance of interactions shaped by the coach's empathy and listening skills and their ability to manage conflict.

Coach education could support coaches to understand the individual nature of the C-A relationship, which is shaped by the unique needs of the athlete. This moves us beyond a 'one size fits all' approach towards a more nuanced understanding of the different C-A relationships that typically exist within these settings. The findings further support the notion that high quality C-A relationships have the potential to help pave the way for increased levels of challenge, in a sustainable and ethical manner (Jowett & Felton, 2024). The findings also emphasise the importance of the coach's professional knowledge in order to gain credibility and respect, a feature of the C-A relationship which is particularly pertinent to the high-performance domain (Potrac et al., 2002)

The C-A relationship exists within, and is influenced by, a wider system of relationships (Wagstaff, 2021). Therefore, coaches are required to develop expertise in building a culture conducive to high quality C-A relationships. The findings support previous research which highlights the importance of coaches communicating an overarching vision for the environment and their ability to forge a culture of acceptance (Gibson & Groom, 2018). Effectively utilising athlete leadership could also support the development of an environment that encourages open communication, athlete voice and high quality C-A relationships (Jowett et al., 2023). Coach education could support coaches to reflect on how the different roles that make up a high-performance coaching and management team could influence the nature of the C-A relationships that are developed. Coaches should understand how to effectively work alongside the MDT, and develop a

culture of collaboration, to inform the coach's behaviours to facilitate higher quality C-A relationships. Finally, to further explore the knowledge coaches require to develop high quality C-A relationships in performance-based football in England, subsequent research should capture the athlete's perspective, given they form one half of the C-A dyad and their voices are largely absent from coach education research (Chapman et al., 2020).

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Table 1. Representation of coaches' current roles

Coach (pseudonym)	Current/most recent role	Years in current/most recent role
John	First Team Assistant Head Coach, English Football League Championship	7 months
Edward	First Team Coach, English Football League One	2 years 11 months
Mike	Head of Coaching, English Premier League Academy	3 years 10 months
Andy	Head of Coaching, English Premier League Academy	4 months
Jim	Assistant Head of Coaching, English Premier League Academy	2 years
Gordon	U23 Head Coach, English Premier League Academy	1 year and 2 months
Phil	Academy Coach, English Premier League Academy	8 years
Rachel	First Team Manager, Women's Super League One	2 months
Susan	First Team Assistant Manager, Women's Super League One	11 months
Ron	First Team Assistant Manager, Women's Super League One	3 years, 3 months
Jack	Senior role (used to protect anonymity), England Women's National Team	6 months