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# 'An arm around the shoulder or a kick up the backside?': Athlete perspectives on the expertise coaches require for the coach–athlete relationship in performance football

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## Abstract

The coach–athlete (C-A) relationship has been explored across multiple disciplines, with coaches' ability to navigate these relationships widely regarded as central to coaching effectiveness. However, support for developing the expertise required by coaches to build effective C-A relationships remains underrepresented within formal coach education programmes. Increasingly, the C-A relationship is recognised as being shaped by broader socio-cultural contexts, highlighting the need to examine relational processes within the specific environments in which they occur. Significantly, this study foregrounds athletes' perspectives from the highest levels of the professional game to explore how coaches' relational expertise is perceived, interpreted, and experienced within C-A relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight male and female professional athletes (n = 4 male, n = 4 female) competing in, or with significant experience of, high-performance football environments. Inductive reflexive thematic analysis generated four themes: (1) Beyond 'building relationships': towards a more considered position (2) The self as the cornerstone of relational practice; (3) Challenging dyadic conceptions of the C-A relationship; and (4) Developing relational astuteness: noticing, negotiating and influencing. The paper provides important contextually situated, athlete-centred insights into the expertise coaches require to develop effective C-A relationships.

## Keywords

Association football, athlete voice, coach development, interpersonal knowledge, soccer

Reviewer: Tarkington Newman (University of Kentucky, USA)

## Introduction

In a field often characterised by contestation, there is a notable point of agreement regarding the centrality of the coach–athlete (C–A) relationship to effective coaching practice. This consensus is reflected in influential conceptualisations of effective coaching, which emphasise the integration of professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to support athlete outcomes within a specific sporting context.[1] Of these domains, interpersonal knowledge relates to the ability to develop effective relationships with others, with the C–A relationship providing a key context in which this knowledge is enacted. Consequently, the C–A relationship has received sustained scholarly attention over the past three decades. Research has been informed by a range of disciplinary traditions, including psychology,[2,3] sociology,[4–6] and the philosophy of education,[7,8] with each offering distinct framings of the relationship. Across these diverse perspectives, however, some common understandings have emerged: the C–A relationship is recognised as integral to effective coaching,[9] coaching is framed as fundamentally relational in nature,[5] and caring relationships are positioned as an essential aspect of practice.[7,8] The C–A relationship therefore remains a foundational construct within coaching scholarship and practice.

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Recent literature has called for the C-A relationship to be foregrounded within its broader socio-cultural context, emphasising that it does not exist within a 'bubble'.[10] Rather, coaching is positioned as a social and relational endeavour in which this socio-cultural complexity is central to understanding the C-A relationship.[5,11,12] Pertinent to the current study, a significant body of work has been conducted within performance football contexts.[4,6,12] Performance football environments are characterised by a vulnerable and increasingly disposable culture,[13] shaped by short-term contracts, pressure to deliver immediate results, and intense public scrutiny.[14] They have been typified as cut-throat and uncaring,[15] where entrenched traditions and norms are rooted in archaic concepts of masculinity and hierarchy that influence the behaviour of the actors within it.[16] These settings are typically shaped by power dynamics, with acts of dominance and authoritarianism commonplace.[6] Performance football settings are also characterised by large squads of athletes and extensive coaching and multidisciplinary teams, making the relational environment inherently complex. As such, relationships are typically highly micropolitical.[17] Individuals may act in self-interest and hold contrasting motivations, goals, and ideologies, all of which influence the nature of the relationships that exist within these settings.[15,18] This often requires coaches to effectively manage the impressions of athletes by presenting a coaching 'front' that enables them to engender credibility, validation, and respect.[4,19] This body of research provides evidence for the situated nature of the C-A relationship in performance football. Therefore, exploring the C-A relationship within this specific context and domain is a central focus of this paper.

Despite an extensive body of evidence highlighting the significance and centrality of the C-A relationship to effective coaching practice,[3,7,9,12] it has been typically underrepresented in formal coach education curricula.[20–23] Newland et al.[22] explored the knowledge relating to the C-A relationship that was integrated into the English Football Association's highest-level practical coaching qualifications, namely the UEFA A Licence and UEFA B Licence awards (Union of European Football Associations). Using semi-structured interviews with coach developers and document analysis of key course materials, the findings indicated that the C-A relationship was not meaningfully addressed within these programmes and, where it was referenced, it was not underpinned by relevant research and was introduced in an implicit and superficial manner. This absence of C-A relationship content was particularly notable given that coach developers consistently described the C-A relationship as integral to coaching practice, while it is also embedded within the assessment framework used to evaluate coaches.[22] More broadly, this paradox reflects a disconnect, despite a substantial body of evidence emphasising the significance of the C-A relationship, the phenomenon is often reported as not meaningfully addressed within coach education programmes,[20–23] meaning coaches report feeling underprepared for the relational complexities of practice.[23] This raises important questions about the knowledge required to support coaches in navigating the complexities of high-performance football environments and developing and maintaining high-quality C-A relationships.

Research that has advanced understanding of the expertise coaches require to successfully develop and maintain these relationships in practice has typically adopted a coach-centric perspective.[4,23,24] However, developing a situated and more complete understanding requires engagement with athletes' perspectives. Exploring the athlete voice allows researchers to move beyond potentially sanitised or superficial accounts of coaching practice and serves as a critical counterbalance to the predominance of coach-centred research.[4,23,24] Grounding understandings of coaching expertise in athletes' experiences is particularly important given that athlete perspectives have historically been marginalised within coaching research, resulting in findings that are often insufficiently connected to the realities of athlete experience.[25,26] Athlete voice therefore represents an important mechanism through which meaningful change can be informed within sporting organisations and systems.[27] Within the current study, privileging the athlete voice is especially pertinent given that the athlete constitutes one half of the C-A dyad. This is particularly significant within high-performance football, where socialisation processes[28] can contribute to the reproduction of coaching behaviours and dominant narratives surrounding coaching practice,[29] encouraging simplistic understandings of effective coaching. Indeed, discourse surrounding the C-A relationship in practice can be reduced to culturally transmitted tropes, such as the coach knowing when to provide a metaphorical "kick up the backside" or an "arm around the shoulder".[23] Consequently, the present study seeks to contribute to a more situated and complete understanding of the relational expertise required by coaches to navigate the complexities of performance sport, generating insights capable of informing coach education and professional practice.

## Method

### *Paradigm positioning*

This study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the importance of understanding how individuals subjectively interpret and make sense of their social world.[30] Consistent with this position, the study is underpinned by a constructivist epistemology, which assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and that multiple realities may exist according to individuals' lived experiences.[31] This paradigmatic stance is appropriate because the study seeks to explore athletes' subjective perceptions of the relational expertise coaches are required to demonstrate to develop and maintain high-

quality C-A relationships. Additionally, the lead researcher's background as a performance coach, including 12 years of experience in high-performance environments and a UEFA A Licence coaching qualification, provides a valuable interpretive lens through which the data can be understood.

## Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to represent a broad range of experiences across professional first-team and youth development environments within the men's and women's game in England. In the English football system, first-team environments refer to the senior squad competing in professional leagues, whereas youth development environments refer to academy programmes designed to develop players prior to potential progression into senior football. Eight athletes (four male, four female), aged between 19 and 35 years (M = 24.9, SD = 5.94), participated in the study (Table 1). All participants identified as White British. Sampling sought to include athletes with extensive experience of high-performance football environments while capturing variation in career trajectories. This included athletes who had progressed to senior elite levels, including professional first-team football and international representation, alongside athletes who had experienced high-performance pathways but whose careers did not develop into sustained senior professional participation (e.g., athletes who progressed through academy systems from U16 to U23 levels but did not transition into senior professional football). This approach avoided privileging exclusively successful career narratives and enabled exploration of the diverse relational experiences that may influence athlete development and progression.

To be eligible for inclusion, participants must have accumulated at least five years of experience within one or more of the following high-performance settings during their careers:

- First-team football within the men's English Premier League or English Football League (top four divisions in England).
- Academy football within a men's English Premier League or English Football League club (U16–U23).
- England men's national youth teams (U16–U21).
- First-team football within the Women's Super League One or Women's Super League Two (top two divisions in England).
- Academy football within a Women's Super League One or Women's Super League Two club (U16–U21).
- England women's national youth teams (U16–U23).

Sample size was guided by Malterud et al.'s concept of informational power.[32] Given the focused aims of the study and the recruitment of participants with extensive experience within high-performance football environments, a smaller sample was considered appropriate. Participants had experience across elite levels of the English football system, including the Premier League, Women's Super League, and international contexts. Consistent with Malterud et al., the specificity of the participant group, combined with the narrow research aim, indicated that fewer participants could provide sufficient information power through depth and relevance of data.[32] Although the anticipated sample size was considered prior to data collection, sample adequacy was continually reflected upon throughout recruitment and data generation in relation to the research aims and the richness of the data produced. A final sample of eight participants was therefore considered sufficient to address the research question.

### Data collection

The interview guide was developed to explore athletes' perspectives and lived experiences of the C-A relationship within performance football contexts, with the aim of generating a more informed understanding of the relational expertise coaches require to establish and maintain high-quality relationships. The guide was informed by findings from previous research conducted by the authors with coach developers[22] and coaches,[23] alongside the aims of the current study. Semi-structured interviews explored athletes' understandings of the C-A relationship, including its perceived importance and role, the challenges and complexities involved in developing and maintaining these relationships, and the expertise coaches require to foster high-quality C-A relationships. Example interview questions included: "*Can you talk me through the role the coach–athlete relationship has played in your career development, if it has at all, and any examples where it has had an impact or not?"* and "*Thinking about coaches you have worked with, can you describe examples of those you experienced the strongest relationships with, and what you felt they did that contributed to those relationships?"* In total, 452 min (M = 56.5, SD = 10) of audio-recorded interview data were collected.

The decision to conduct interviews on video calling software was made on the basis that participants would be more comfortable talking about highly personal issues, such as the C-A relationship, within the privacy of their own home.[33] Accessibility to participants was also a key factor in this decision. It was deemed to be unrealistic to arrange face-to-face interviews with high-profile athletes, due to their demanding roles.

### Data analysis

Data were analysed using an inductive reflexive thematic analysis[34] and NVivo Version 12 software. Given the paradigmatic positioning of the current research, meaning and knowledge were understood to be contextually situated,

**Table 1.** Representation of athletes' playing experience.

| Athlete(pseudonym) | High performance experience | Age |
|---|---|---|
| Seb | England Under 21s, English Premier League | 32 |
| John | English Football League Championship | 24 |
| James | English Premier League U21s | 27 |
| Ben | English Premier League U21s | 32 |
| Susan | Senior England, Women's Super League One | Not stated to protect anonymity |
| Carole | Senior England, Women's Super League One | Not stated to protect anonymity |
| Margaret | Senior England, Women's Super League One | Not stated to protect anonymity |
| Robyn | England U23 s, Women's Super League One | 19 |

with researcher subjectivity viewed as a resource for the research process rather than a threat to be controlled.[35] The analysis was conducted by the first author, following the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis.[34] Consistent with Braun & Clarke's process, these phases were not followed in a linear manner and were revisited iteratively throughout the analytic process. Initially, the first author became familiar with the data through repeated reading, highlighting and annotating areas of interest. Second, initial codes were generated, providing preliminary analytic labels. Third, initial themes were developed from the coded data. For example, the codes "self-awareness", "reflective skills", "clear values and beliefs", and "predictable and consistent behaviour" were developed into the theme '*The self as the cornerstone of relational practice'*. The fourth stage involved reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and distinctiveness.[34] The fifth phase involved defining and naming the themes. The final stage involved writing up and reporting the findings.

### *Rigour*

The intention of the current research was not simply to adopt a specific universal set of standardised criteria, as this would be counterintuitive given the interpretivist nature of the current study. Aligned with contemporary thinking in qualitative research, the work of Tracy was utilised to bring such considerations to the fore and to decide which of the criteria would be most appropriate for the current research.[36] Rigour was conceived with a particular emphasis on the following constructs: worthy topic, sincerity, credibility and significant contribution.[37]

The C-A relationship in high-performance football provides a worthy topic given its timely and significant nature, with the relationship between coach and athlete positioned as fundamental to athletes' wellbeing.[7] The use of a reflexive journal was a key feature that supported a sincere approach. The journal was used throughout the data collection process. The content of the journal related to the author's thoughts and feelings before and after data collection and supported the continual development of the author's understanding of the C-A relationship. For example, journal notes enabled the recognition of important themes, relating to *The self as the cornerstone of relational practice*. This was unexpected given the research was focused on the athletes' perspective but encouraged an appreciation of the importance the athlete placed on their perceptions that the coach's behaviours and communication were underpinned by a stable set of values and beliefs.

Credibility and significant contribution were strengthened by foregrounding athlete voice, a perspective traditionally underrepresented in coaching research.[25,26] This provided insights from a hard-to-reach high-performance population. Credibility was further developed by using a pilot interview with a participant of a similar profile to those included in the main study. An example of refinement to the interview guide concerned the substantial rewording of a key question following the pilot interview. The initial question, "*How influential has the coach–athlete relationship been on your career?",* was found to elicit predominantly brief, generalised responses (e.g., "very influential" or "it's been important") with limited elaboration. In response, the question was reworded into a more open and narrative-focused form: "*Can you talk me through the role the coach–athlete relationship has played in your career development, if it has at all, and any examples where it has had an impact?"* This adjustment was designed to reduce evaluative framing and encourage more detailed, experience-based accounts. The refinement strengthened the depth and contextual richness of the data generated while maintaining consistency with the overall interview schedule.

## Discussion of findings

### *Theme 1: beyond 'building relationships': towards a more considered position*

Athletes described the nature and salience of the C-A relationship as evolving over time, shaped by their changing developmental needs, career stage, and experiences with different coaches. Across these experiences, the C-A relationship was perceived as fundamental to effective coaching practice.

> I actually think it's the biggest part of coaching (the C-A relationship). I think it's the biggest part of it because like I said, if

> you feel important and you feel valued the likelihood is you're going to perform better. I mean, look, it's not to say that that's a guarantee, but, speaking as an athlete, when I knew I was valued you would go out and play, you just feel bigger, you feel, I guess, more empowered to do things. More invested in it because you know that someone is invested in you. (Ben)

Reflecting on his experiences, Ben emphasises the centrality of high-quality C-A relationships to effective coaching, whilst also demonstrating nuance in acknowledging that performance outcomes are multifactorial. In line with previous research, he positions the C-A relationship as central in determining how athletes feel[38] and, ultimately, how they perform.[23] Given its perceived importance, a logical corollary is that coaches should be supported in developing the expertise required in this area. However, this proposition may appear more straightforward than the complexity inherent in determining what knowledge should be foregrounded to support coaches, with athletes suggesting that meaningful development in this domain requires sustained and in-depth exploration.

> I think truthfully that part (the C-A relationship) is the most important part. So yeah, you can sign the best athletes in the world, but if you don't know how to manage those athletes I think you've lost the battle already. So, I think that should be first and foremost. If I ever went into coaching that is something you would really need to focus on developing a strong understanding of, but it's complicated (Carole)

> I can see it from a manager's point of view (the C-A relationship), it's tricky. They are required to get a result at the weekend, make sure individual athletes are improving and keeping everybody happy in the squad. I see relationships from their point of view, it is tricky. (Susan)

These accounts of the C-A relationship and the expertise coaches require to effectively navigate it highlight the multifaceted nature of relational work in coaching. Athletes recognised these competing demands, reflecting on how the C-A relationship is shaped by and interacts with performance pressures,[39] individual development expectations,[23] and the micropolitical dynamics of performance contexts.[40] Collectively, these accounts suggest that coaches should move beyond the often simplistic rhetoric of 'building relationships'. Instead, relational expertise was understood as requiring sustained thought and deep reflection to develop a considered position that informs coaching practice. This interpretation supports previous calls for coach development to enhance coaches' cognisance of their relationships with athletes and to encourage critical interrogation of these relationships.[41] One may suggest that developing an underpinning position on the C-A relationship to guide practice may require a similar level of structured conceptual engagement to that which many coaches already apply to developing their game model, which informs their team's playing style and tactical principles.[42] However, this underdevelopment of relational expertise amongst coaches through their formal education experiences[22] may not be unique to sport. Rather, it may reflect a broader societal tendency whereby people exist with very little instruction about how to practice their relational lives with others.[43] Coaches critically examining their relational practice may be particularly important within performance football contexts, where it is necessary to disrupt dominant coaching discourses by challenging folk theories and pseudo-principles,[44] particularly in relation to the C-A relationship.[23] This is especially pertinent in performance football, where coaching behaviours are frequently reproduced and normalised through processes of socialisation,[28] allowing outdated tropes and assumptions to be perpetuated without critical examination.[22,23]

## *Theme 2: the self as the cornerstone of relational practice*

Athletes foregrounded the importance of coaches' self-knowledge and introspection, with practice underpinned by a clear philosophical stance. Such clarity provides athletes with consistency and predictability in coaching behaviours, which in turn supports the development of high-quality C-A relationships. Across the sample, the importance of intrapersonal clarity was emphasised, with self-understanding positioned as a prerequisite for relational competence, as described by Seb.

> If you can't go into a room, as a coach, and somebody says, who are you? What do you stand for? And you can't answer it pretty quickly, there's a problem. I think that's the starting block for what you need to start off with. You know that's the start. You can't build a relationship, I don't think, genuinely with anybody else unless you have an understanding of who you currently are, where you need to be, where you want to go and what you need to do to get there. They are all important questions to ask yourself and then once you start to figure them things out, it'll give you a greater understanding and a better way of connecting with other people. (Seb)

Seb provides an account of how coaching 'front',[19] the public-facing performance of coaching practice, is perceived by athletes. He describes how coaches' credibility is subject to athlete scrutiny, involving processes of testing and interrogation,[45] which is unsurprising given the cut-throat and often unforgiving nature of performance football.[15] Such processes also highlight how athletes may challenge and negotiate power within the C-A relationship.[46] Successfully navigating this scrutiny requires coaches to possess a coherent sense of self that can be consistently enacted and communicated to athletes. This enables

coaches to project authenticity and confidence which provides a foundation for relational credibility.[19]

To develop a consistent and critically reflective sense of self, coaches may need to develop an awareness of the philosophical position that underpins their coaching practice.

> I think the good coaches just have clear values, which I like as well. You know, like honesty, responsibility, and accountability. Being accountable for your own actions, hard work and you know there's a few I see in myself and how I operate. So, obviously that has to come from, and be grown by, the coach. If I see the coach has clear values, it makes it a lot easier to obviously, from my side, to build that connection and the best ones that I've seen all have that. (Seb)

Across the sample, athletes emphasised the importance of coaches' axiology, that is, the values, beliefs, and principles that shape what they consider important within coaching practice.[44] This influences the C-A relationship, as Seb explains that these values "make it easier" to build a connection with athletes. This may require coaches to critically reflect upon their own axiology, but also consider which values are likely to be perceived as legitimate, meaningful, and endorsed by athletes, and around which both parties can coalesce and build a relationship. However, axiology is inextricably linked to an exploration of ethics,[44] and therefore how these values should be enacted through practice, relating to morality and the implementation of right action.[47] Supporting coaches to explore their axiological and ethical positions is a complex endeavour,[48] particularly as it requires challenging dominant discourses and taken-for-granted ways of working within coaching contexts.[44] It also requires coaches to examine how the gritty realities of performance football, such as intense performance pressures[39] and micropolitical dynamics,[40] may make it difficult to adhere to these philosophical positions. However, this work is particularly salient given recent reports of dysfunctional and abusive C-A relationships.[49,50]

The importance of a coherent axiological and ethical position, which is consistently embodied by the coach, is also highlighted by John.

> Being predictable (what do coaches need to understand about the C-A relationship?) because the worst thing that you can have, I think from a coach, is an unpredictable nature where you go into an interaction and you're going "I have no idea what I'm getting from him today" I might get something that's distant. I might get something that's really philosophical. I might get something that's angry. I might get something that's soft. If I can understand, I'm going to get a consistent approach in whatever capacity that is and that should, I think, be attributed to their personality as a person. So being a coach shouldn't come before being a human. It should be that their coaching is what they do and who they are. (John)

John described the potentially erosive effects of unpredictability in a coach's behaviour and how this may undermine the C-A relationship. Given the high-stakes nature of performance football, one could speculate that such unpredictability may, at least in part, stem from the extreme pressures coaches experience within these environments.[51] Consequently, John describes how coaches may struggle to consistently embody and enact their espoused ethical positions, as they become buffeted by events due to the inherent volatility of the performance football environment. However, previous research focusing on coaches with a history of repeated performance success has demonstrated that the behaviours of expert coaches are "anchored" by a clear philosophical standpoint, providing a sense of purpose and direction.[24] John describes how this 'anchoring', to their values and beliefs, could also provide a sense of stability to ensure consistency and predictability in the coach's communication and interactions with the athlete.

### *Theme 3: challenging dyadic conceptions of the C-A relationship*

Models of the C-A relationship have typically focused on dyadic conceptions, with the individual coach and athlete as the primary focus of analysis. However, across the sample, athletes described more complex, differentiated, and context-dependent relationships with coaches. For instance, Susan reflected.

> I have different relationships with the different coaches, and I think that is important. Like at my current club we have the assistant coach who has been amazing for me. It is a weird relationship. She is amazing in terms of technical detail, she has made me come on so much, I really appreciate that from her. But then she is the type of personality….she can be such a hard task master….so I really valued all the time she put into me in, but then I wouldn't seek her out to do clips with her (review training or matchday footage), because it is too negative. Naturally I'm the type of person who already sees those negatives, maybe I need something a bit different for that. So, I won't seek her out to do clips. I take what I want from that relationship. I've learnt that if I want this thing, I don't go to her, I go to another coach. I go to her for her good bits. (Susan)

Susan's reflection, alongside those of other athletes, describes how different coaches may fulfil distinct relational roles within the performance environment. Athletes described how they actively navigated these relationships in different ways. In doing so, these accounts challenge notions of the C-A relationship as a singular, stable, two-person unit.[2] While there is a more recent appreciation that C-A relationships operate within a complex web of interpersonal relations involving a range of support staff

from diverse disciplines,[52] questions remain regarding whether C-A relationship research has kept pace with the growing complexity of contemporary technical coaching structures within football.[23] Indeed, well-resourced first-team environments may now include head coaches, assistant coaches, set-piece coaches, transition coaches and positional coaches, while youth development environments often comprise lead coaches, assistant coaches, academy managers, heads of coaching, and heads of age phases. The theme suggests that relational work can be distributed across multiple coaching practitioners occupying distinct roles, rather than being located within a singular dyadic relationship, and thus advances beyond the dyadic conceptualisation of the C-A relationship. John exemplifies this re-conceptualisation by illustrating how these distinct relationships with various members of the technical coaching team enabled him to navigate a particularly challenging period in his career.

> My dad was arrested by the police when I was 19. I made the choice that the next day I went in (to training). I went in and didn't say anything. I just got on with it. I actually trained the night that he got arrested and the next day I went to training again. On Saturday I went to play a game, and I sort of neglected it. Now this was at a time when I was in the first team, but I wasn't really involved. I was training and stuff like that, but I wasn't really playing. But I thought I was close (to getting a first team appearance) and so I thought just get on with it. But clearly, I'd changed somewhat because Phil Jones (Pseudonym), my coach said "oh, let's come and do some video analysis, John, in the room." So, he got arrested on the Thursday and then Phil pulled me in on the Monday on the ruse of let's do some video analysis and then sat me down and basically just said "look, the doors closed most people have gone, what's going on at home?" And I just sort of broke down. Because clearly…he just knew that there was something and I think that's because I had such a close relationship (John)

John emphasises the importance of the relationship he had with an individual coach within the wider coaching team. This example reflects the 'art of noticing',[53] whereby a coach's relational closeness and knowledge of the athlete, relative to other members of the technical coaching team, enabled the identification of subtle changes in behaviour and appropriate intervention. Previous research suggests that coaches operating outside the head coach role in first-team environments may facilitate greater relational proximity and emotional closeness with athletes, partly due to reduced responsibility for selection decisions and playing time allocation.[23,54] However, while this illustrates one example of how relational dynamics may vary across technical coaching roles, the interplay of influencing factors suggests these processes are more complex and multifaceted.[23] Indeed, the distribution of relational work within the C-A relationship remains an underdeveloped area in the literature, particularly regarding how different coaching roles and the coaches occupying these roles shape relationship processes. Such considerations are likely to have important implications for coaches reflecting on their role within coaching teams, as well as for those responsible for constructing coaching staff, including how complementary combinations of personalities, gender, and professional experience may be assembled to better support athletes' relational needs.

### *Theme 4 developing relational astuteness: noticing, negotiating and influencing*

Athletes described how a dialogic approach adopted by coaches, to share perspectives and expectations for the relationship, was critical to the development of high-quality C-A relationships. Dialogue was central to developing a sense of reciprocity and shared responsibility in developing high-quality relationships, as outlined by Seb.

> I think as an athlete if you're getting asked to come in and asked for your opinion, I think it instantly allows you to feel free and that you can go and approach the coach. Having one to one meetings to get a feel for the athlete, get his opinions on the place. How can we help each other? How can we help the individual? What can I do for the manager? As the athlete you start to understand what the coach wants from me as an individual and the group. (Seb)

Seb describes an important process of collaboration and negotiation initiated by the coach[12,40] This negotiation sets the parameters for an understanding of what athletes can do for the coach and vice versa. At this point in his career, Seb describes himself as an experienced athlete who has moved across several professional clubs, having played in the English Premier League and a variety of English Football League clubs and perceives himself as a leader and influential figure at the club. The importance of coaches noticing who the influential athletes are within the squad of athletes and developing high-quality C-A relationships by making them feel valued is well established.[12,23,55] This reflects the inherently micropolitical nature of the C-A relationship, where coaches engage in processes of strategy, cooperation, and diplomacy,[41] and where an understanding of how influence and power operate within complex organisational structures is required to secure committed C-A relationships with key agents.

However, athletes were critical of what they perceived as superficial, inauthentic, and tokenistic dialogic approaches, in which apparent consultation masked a lack of genuine influence or shared decision-making, only serving to legitimise pre-determined coaching decisions. Instead, they perceived it as preferable for coaches to occasionally articulate clear expectations and adopt a more directive approach.

> Tracie, (Pseudonym first team manager) she's got enough sort of experience, and she's been successful to say I've built this here at (current club) for years. We built this from the ground up. This is proven to have worked…This is what we expect from you, this is the culture, and you come away thinking, if I was asked, I'm extremely clear. (Susan)

> It's also important…letting people know how we want to do it here and this is the way forward and these are the basic fundamentals of the group, which you can define as you said previously at the start, this is what this [the C-A relationship] is, this is who I am, and this is what it looks like. (Margaret)

Athletes in our sample described, at times, valuing the clarity that more directive approaches adopted by coaches provided, perceiving this as supportive in the development of high-quality C–A relationships by fostering role clarity. Thus, directive coaching may be relationally supportive when it provides athletes with structure. For example, this could involve coaches communicating clear criteria for team selection or expectations around professionalism. In performance football settings, such parameters and expectations may become particularly salient given large squad sizes and diverse and at times conflicting athlete motivations.[18] Without such structure, coaches may risk becoming overly absorbed in attempting to accommodate multiple individual perspectives, potentially leading to a loss of collective focus and direction.[56] Here, it is important to make a clear distinction. This should not be interpreted as athletes valuing unethical, controlling coaching behaviours[57] that engender docility and obedience.[58] Rather, it foregrounds the complex ways in which athletes perceive coach behaviours and emphasises the nuance and skilfulness involved in the balancing act of relationship-building in these contexts.

Athletes also emphasised how the C-A relationship is embedded within, and influenced by, broader and more complex networks of interpersonal relations among athletes,[59] particularly within team sports such as football, as illustrated in James' account.

> You have to move on (after conflict between coach and athlete). You don't want things to fester, because if you have fallen out with the athlete, it's mad how much, like, gossiping goes on and there's little cliques in changing rooms. Every changing room in the world is full of cliques. So, if you lose an athlete and you don't deal with something properly, it's mad how quickly things can spread like wildfire in changing rooms. So, I think it's so important that you always hear in the press that a coach has lost the dressing room. Chances are, he's lost the athlete who's lost a clique, who's then lost the dressing room. That's how it is like. (James)

Conflict in the C-A relationship is not confined to dyadic interactions but circulates through wider team networks, shaping collective perceptions and dynamics. Professional football environments are typically highly micropolitical[40] and structured through cliques or subgroups, a recurrent feature of team sport where individuals coalesce around shared personalities, interests, or cultural and social backgrounds.[60] This has important implications for coaches seeking to maintain a coherent coaching 'front' and manage impressions among athletes,[4,61] as undermining and damaging narratives may develop, with micro-level C-A conflict potentially scaling into macro-level outcomes such as weakened authority and broader relational disruption across the squad. Coaching practice therefore involves not only the development of high-quality individual C-A relationships, but also an understanding of intra-squad patterns of influence, for example, who influences whom, who is listened to, and how meaning is co-constructed within and between subgroups.

## Strength and limitations

The current study explores the C-A relationship within the unique context of high-performance football in England. Importantly, it foregrounds athlete perspectives, including those who played in senior international teams, the English Premier League, the Women's Super League, as well as contexts further down the English football pyramid. This is pertinent given ongoing calls to foreground athletes' voice in research,[25,26] particularly as high-performance professional football athletes are typically difficult to reach. Importantly, an equal number of male and female athletes were sampled, providing diverse perspectives across the men's and women's game. However, despite the informational power of the sample, participants' perspectives may not represent the experiences of all high-performance professional footballers in England. Additionally, the sample lacked diversity in relation to race and ethnicity, which represents an important limitation of the research.

## Conclusion

The C-A relationship has been widely recognised as central to coaching effectiveness[9,12,23]; however, it remains underrepresented within formal coach education.[20–23] This study addressed this gap by foregrounding athletes' perspectives. Athletes demonstrated an appreciation of the complexity of coaches' relational work, with coaches continually navigating competing demands, including performance pressures, selection decisions, and individual athlete needs. This required coaches to develop a considered and intentional approach to their relational practice. Athletes emphasised that effective relational practice requires coaches to develop a clear and consistent philosophical, ethical, and axiological foundation, which provides predictability in their behaviours despite contextual challenges. They also highlighted that relational work extends beyond individual C-A dyads,

with technical coaching teams requiring intentional coordination to meet diverse athlete needs. Finally, athletes identified relational astuteness as imperative, involving the ability to notice, negotiate and influence relational dynamics through a balance of dialogue and directive approaches, while recognising how individual relationships are embedded within the wider squad dynamics.

For national governing bodies, policy makers, and coach educators, the findings highlight the importance of more explicitly incorporating the C–A relationship within coach development agendas. Furthermore, the findings identify key areas that could inform the development of coach education content and curriculum design. For coaches, the findings highlight the importance of critically reflecting on their relational practice, including their understanding of self and the values and beliefs that underpin their relational practice, how relational work is distributed across wider coaching teams, and their capacity for relational astuteness in noticing, negotiating, and influencing relational dynamics. Engaging with the challenges, tensions, and complexities identified within this study may support coaches in developing a more reflexive and considered understanding of the C–A relationship.

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## Ethical considerations

Full ethical approval for this research was granted by the authors' academic institution. The approval was provided by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) (Reference: 23/SPS/062).

## Consent to participate

Written informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

## Consent for publication

Written informed consent was obtained from participants for the publication of anonymised research findings.

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## Declaration of conflicting interests

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## Data availability

The interview data generated during this study are not publicly available. Participant consent for the public sharing of full interview transcripts was not obtained as this was not included within the participant information sheet and consent procedures approved for this study. Furthermore, given the small and identifiable nature of the sample within a high-performance sporting context, sharing raw interview data could compromise participant confidentiality.

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