

## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COACHES AND ATHLETES IN RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS

Vesela Ivanova<sup>1</sup>, Vasil Dimitrov<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** Interesting for science in terms of success, are coach-athlete relationship. They are subject of much research and analysis, as the focus is on building strong bonds of trust, respect and support between the two most important sides in the sport.

The aim of our study is to research coach-athlete relationship in rhythmic gymnastics and its influence on the training process. In the investigation, a questionnaire with 24 items was used and the respondents were 14 elite rhythmic gymnasts. The results of the study showed the majority of elite gymnasts have their own opinion about the methods used; they want to be listened to. The biggest differences being observed in the proximity of the individual athletes with the coach.

A good relationship between a coach and an athlete here are not only the key to sports success, but they are a major source of good education, building a value system and character of the gymnasts.

**UDC Classification:** 37.06, **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.12955/pss.v1.54>

**Keywords:** rhythmic gymnastics, coach, athlete, relationship

### Introduction

Coaches are the most important people, who influence athletes' experiences in the sport. The coach-athlete relationship is a very interesting topic in the field of sports psychology (Jowett, 2006). It serves as a platform where the teacher and student interact in special way to bring success and inspire respect through athletes' performance on the major sports scene. This determined the main aim of the study, namely, to identify the effectiveness of the coach-athlete relationship for optimizing the training process. There are a variety of methods for achieving the goal, the most commonly used of the research field are different kinds of surveys, observations, interviews and of course analytical and statistical methods. In this article, a questionnaire and statistical data processing through variation analysis are mainly applied. The methodology was tested with athletes of Rhythmic Gymnastics, where the good cooperation between trainer and trainee has a huge impact on performance and this is seen in practice. Gymnasts spend from 6 to 8 hours a day, 6 days a week with their coaches, and almost every weekend they are engaged in competitions. For them, the hall is like a second home, the team is as a family, and the coaches are as parents. Many of those, dealing with this sport have almost no social environment outside of gymnastics, so the relationship with the coach (the person with whom their work is directly and indirectly connected) is reflected not only in the sports results, but also in their lives in general. In order to reach the basis and importance of coach-athlete relationships, it is necessary to understand what they really are, what their value is, how they help the sports achievement and what is behind them.

The literature review gives a broad idea of what the behavior of the coach and that of his athlete show separately and how they interact with each other. According to Horn (2002), the coach's behavior, his expectations, beliefs and goals are at the center of the model for coaching effectiveness (Iancheva and Prodanov, 2018), which together with the coach's tasks of technical, tactical instructions, as well as organizing, planning, supporting depend upon the relationship between the coach and the athlete. It is clear that feelings, thoughts and behavior of coaches and athletes are not independent of each other nor either coach nor athlete act as a separate unit. They are highly interdependent in their behaviour all the time (Aliaga, & Gunderson, 2000). Avci et al. (2018) confirm this and maintain the opinion that the coach and athlete are mutually and causally interconnected.

In rhythmic gymnastics, coaches usually spend much of their time and energy on the technical elements and physical preparation. According McCready (1984) the reason is, because their knowledge is more clearly defined and controllable there. On the other side attitudes, feelings and motivations involved in an athletic relationship to coach and training process are less controllable. Anyway, it is a fact that positive interpersonal qualities such as mutual trust, respect, support and processes of good communication, understanding are considered as super benefits for performance

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Public health, Health care and Tourism, Wellness Institute Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria, veselaivanovaivanova@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup> Sports Management, National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski", Sofia, Bulgaria, messaiiah1331@gmail.com

success and satisfaction (Jowett and Cockerill, 2003; Wylleman, 2000; Jowett et al., 2005). The coaches can also influence stress and the development of exhaustion (DeFreese and Smith, 2014; Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2016), through encouragement, love and faith to their competitor. The positive athletes' environment and supportive social interactions have a potential to enhance the sport's progress in the future (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). Coaches, who neglect the influential nature of the trainer-trainee relationship in the process of coaching are risking the successful development of an athlete's potential (Lyle, 1999). Jowett (2003) thinks that every kind of lack of trust, respect or verbal and physical exploitation are components, undermining coaches' and athletes' welfare.

Let's underline that the coach-athlete relationship is fundamental for the development of athlete's physical and psychosocial skills (Davis and Jowett, 2014). There are a few questions about that: "How the coach's behavior can help in developing a high-level athlete and to keep him/her there for a long time?" (Myers et al., 2010) and "What makes the ideal coach-athlete relationship" (Dominteanu, 2014)? One of the answers for the both questions is the way of communication. According Jowett (2002) and Dominteanu (2014) it contains very important components. They are clarity, conciseness, correctness, completeness, kindness, and positivity. The communication between the coach and the competitor is important, but a good relationship between the two parties is determined by the overall behavior of the coach towards the athlete. The multidimensional model of leadership in sports is one of the most widely used to examine coaching behavior. Its instrument is the leadership scale, which measures the coach's style, motivation, constructive attitude (Chelladurai, 1990). However, the results show one fact: Coaching is a complex endeavour that requires both interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge from the trainer (Côté and Gilbert, 2009). They include understanding of the sports situation, efficacy (Hampson and Jowett, 2014), satisfaction and other factors.

Properly established relationships between a coach and a competitor in every sport are the basis for realization in it, and the observations show that there is no top athlete who did not trust his coach unconditionally. Mageau & Vallerand (2003) concluded that the coach-athlete relationship are one of the most important factors in an athletes' life. The harmony and high level of interaction (verbal and non-verbal) between the teacher and the student leads to athletes' happiness (Lafrenière et al., 2011). According Deci and Ryan (2002) a coach who involves athletes in the coaching process shows attention, concern to their personal life can increase athletes' prosperity.

## **Methods**

The main aim of the study is to identify the effectiveness of coach-athlete relationships in optimizing the training process and achieving high sports results. The investigated sample includes 14 elite rhythmic gymnasts between 13-17 years old. In order to study the coach-athlete relationship, specifically for elite rhythmic gymnastics, a questionnaire was used and the results were processed by variation analysis. The questionnaire was borrowed from Hanin & Stambulov (2017) and contained a total of 24 statements which are related to the athlete's attitude towards the coach, including three components: gnostic, emotional, behavioral. The statement asked had to be answered "yes" or "no", and depending of the statement and whether it is positive or negative, gives 1 point. Where the gymnasts believe that the statement corresponds to their relationship with the coach, a "yes" answer is given, and where the statement is incorrect in their opinion, a "no" answer is given. For a key that has a "-" sign corresponding to the statement number, 1 point is added if the answer is no. If the key number of the answer to the statement is positive, the answer must be "yes" to get a point. The maximum score for each scale is 8. The processing of the results examines and includes the key reporting of each scale: gnostic, emotional, and behavioral. A variational analysis was made to determine the arithmetic mean values of the individual scales for the elite rhythmic gymnastics group, using "Microsoft Excel 2010". It should be emphasized that the survey is anonymous and any interference by a coach or others is prohibited. The results provide information that can categorically indicate whether there is a difference in understanding and expectations of the coach and the athletes, where it can be emphasized and required more from the competitor and in which cases he or she remains misunderstood without compromising or putting him/her in awkward situation. The time for the survey did not require more than 5 minutes, but the detailed instruction was mandatory and the feedback was sought, if there is any ambiguity regarding the used methodology. The answers are only two, and deep thinking was not necessary. All athletes can be surveyed simultaneously or separately,

which gives the opportunity for the coach to plan the training process without disturbing the training tasks.

N	Statements	Yes	No
1.	The coach is able to accurately predict the results of her student.		
2.	It's hard to understand with the coach.		
3.	The coach- fair man.		
4.	The coach skillfully guides me during a competition.		
5.	The coach obviously has no sensitivity at working with people.		
6.	Coach's words are law to me.		
7.	The coach carefully plans the training work with me.		
8.	I am completely pleased from the coach.		
9.	The coach is not demanding enough with me.		
10.	A coach can always give reasonable advice.		
11.	I totally trust the coach.		
12.	Coach evaluation is very important to me.		
13.	The coach works mainly on the model.		
14.	Working with a coach is a pleasure.		
15.	My coach pays a little attention.		
16.	The coach, in principle, does not take into account my individual characteristics.		
17.	Coach weakly feel my mood.		
18.	The coach always listens to my opinion.		
19.	I have no doubt about the correctness and necessity of the methods and means used by the coach.		
20.	I will not share with my coach my innermost thoughts.		
21.	Coach punishes me for the slightest violation.		
22.	The coach knows my strengths and weaknesses very well.		
23.	I would like to become such as my coach.		
24.	We have a purely business relationship with the coach.		

Source: Authors

Scales		
Gnostic	Emotional	Behavioral
1, 4, 7, 10, 22, -13, -16, 19	-2, -5, 8, 11, 14, -17, -20, 23	3, 6, -9, 12, -15, 18, -21, -24

Note: A minus in front of item number means that it is counted and taken into account, if the answer, if the answer is "no".

Source: Authors

## Results

Gnostic		Emotional		Behavioral	
Mean	7.71	Mean	7.14	Mean	6.64
Mode	8	Mode	7	Mode	7
Range	1	Range	2	Range	3
Minimum	7	Minimum	6	Minimum	5
Maximum	8	Maximum	8	Maximum	8
Count	14	Count	14	Count	14

Source: Authors

The gnostic scale reflects the differences in the preferred methodologies of the trainer and his/ her competitor, or inconsistencies in the understanding of the training process between the two parties. The best result is the highest possible numerical value after the sum of points obtained. In this study it is regulated as 8 points for each scale as the maximum result. For the gnostic scale, the group mean is 7.71 points, as the most common result was the maximum (8 points). This indicates that the majority of the group believes in the methodology chosen by the coach and the positive effect of its application into the practice (Tab. 3). Although the minimum result is 7 points and the difference between the best

and the weakest one is only 1 point, we believe that among some of the elite gymnasts there is a doubt about the correctness of the used means and methods by the coach according to their individual abilities. In the questionnaire, some of the athletes note that the coach is mainly working on a model and probably this bothers them. Working with a specific model, usually borrowed from colleagues with extensive experience could limit creativity in the training process, using new modern practices, and developing innovative methods. The lack of sufficient diversity, on the other hand, would also be reason for a loss of interest, boredom, due to the long duration and daily workload in the rhythmic gymnastics.

The emotional scale reflects the emotional connection between the coach and his/her athlete. The maximum result here again is 8 points, but the best one is 4 points. The lowest values show a weak relationship which can be considered as an indicator of misunderstanding, poor communication, or lack of trust. Higher values, on the other hand, may give reason to believe, that there are quite strong emotions in the training process, which also leads to its lack of effectiveness. Looking at Table 3, it can be seen that the average value of the emotional scale is 7.14 points, which could be defined as a high score for the group and to be accepted that the girls, who are competing in a high professional level in the rhythmic gymnastics have a strong emotional connection with their coaches. However, most of them refrain from giving the maximum number of points for this scale, preferring a compromise option (7 points), which again prove the strong emotions between trainer and trainee. The difference between the highest value (8 points) and the lowest for this indicator (6 points) actually shows that even if all these gymnasts are some of the best in their country and in their sport, for which is necessary trust, respect and support between them and their coach, not every girl has a real affinity to the coach, or at least it is to a different degree. Some of the studied openly admit that they would not share their innermost thoughts with their coach, and this is probably a way to distinguish their personal life from that in the sports hall. It is good to have sincerity between a coach and a competitor, but it should not disrupt professionalism in their relationship. Part of the girls also underline that the coach has a little sense for their mood. It is necessary the specialist to understand the competitors and their feelings, but how acceptable is to adapt the training plan and make compromises according the mood of someone is not described in the scientific literature. Allowing of too many shortcuts in the job does not lead to positive results and character building in the athletes.

The behavioral scale measures coach-athlete relationship, but specifically targeted towards their attitudes and reactions mainly in a work level. The type of temperament of the participants plays a major role here. The best numerical value is 8 points. At this scale mutual compromises are important in the work and each-other adaptation. In the lower numerical values, after calculating the points, there could be clearly expressed or completely suppressed peculiarities in the temperament of the participants during the training process, which would damage the individual approach. In many cases it is possible arising of a quiet or not quiet conflict due to the inability to understand why and for what is a specific training task. Interestingly, at the behavioral scale, the elite group of gymnasts (distinguished by perfect discipline) actually showed the lowest average in the form of 6.64 points from the three indicators for studying coach-athlete relationship (Tab. 3). It provokes the opinion that despite the shown confidence of the competitors in the methodology applied by the coach and the strong emotional connection between the two parties, girls seek respect for their personality and try to demonstrate it. The most common result in the gymnast's inquiry is 7 points, as the highest is 8 points and the lowest- 5 points (Tab. 3). It can be seen here that the difference between the maximum and the minimum achievement is increased (3 points), compared to the other two scales, which confirms the thesis that the elite athletes in the rhythmic gymnastics express a character, want their opinion to be valued and want to have more discussion than just the imposition of firm beliefs. In the questionnaire, some of the girls shared that the coach does not listen to their opinion, which means that they are looking for a field of expression and want to be actively and resolutely involved in the sports-competitive process. Others of the gymnasts think that the coach is not requiring enough. Here are some questions arise: Do the girls know their own capabilities well enough? Do they trust the coach's judgment? Do they feel ignored or undervalued? To answer these questions a lot more research and analysis are needed, but one thing is clear these girls are motivated to train more than is their current workload. Some of the respondents also made it clear that their coach pays a little attention to them. It can mean two things, that these athletes want special attention and attitude or their aim is to justify

their own weaknesses by that they have not enough attention. On one of the questions, part of the girls strongly state that they have a purely business relationship with their coach. Personal and business relationships should be differentiated without a doubt, but when the specialist knows competitors well, he or she is friendly orientated and correctly talking to them can only improve and optimize the training process. Overall, how a competitor will listen and understand the coach's opinion depends largely on the teacher's approach. In the questionnaire some gymnasts claim that the coach punishes them at the slightest offense. We believe that punishment is not the surest way to deal with athletes' problems, but we support the view that sport is built on the basis of clear specific rules and that every violation leads to a certain sanction. As educators, as people who build character, and when it comes to sports for high sports achievements and elite athletes, compromises with the discipline should not be made. Every great athlete should know that every action has a counteraction, every violation has its consequences, if not on the training carpet, then on the competitive one.

### **Discussion**

The specialized sports literature definitely emphasizes that coaches should use a science-based and reasoned methodology for coaching their athletes. It actually means work on a model because a small part of the coaches are able to implement an experiment and prove its effectiveness in the future. The question here is how much we have to take into account previous experience and this is one of the most important moments in the sports practice. However, every period in sports is different with different trends, different rules, different athletes. Successful, in our view, could be the combination of a great deal of knowledge of the sport discipline, observing of good pedagogical models and methodologies, a sense of innovation and upgrading. Another interesting case in the sport for high sports achievements is the extent to which emotions should be present in the coach-athlete relationship. To what extent are they healthy? Does the coach need to be mindful of the athlete's sentiment and when should he or she put up a boundary to keep the process going? Unfortunately, so far there are no precise dimensions and answers to these questions, the coach makes individual decisions that do not always support the training process, and the reasons for this can be both objective and purely subjective. This scientific article, as well as the practice, raises the question of whether the coach should listen to the opinion of the competitor, whether his/her point of view may be a factor (he/she has not enough knowledge, competencies and the objective way of thinking in the training process, which sometimes requires heavy loads). Does the coach's authority get lost in this situation and does this seem like a doubt in his/her own judgment? We strongly believe that the coach needs to receive feedback from his/her competitor, in the form of observing his/her reactions, his/her behavior and performance of the tasks assigned, as well as through discussions and conversations. However, the decision how to act in a given situation and what the training plan should be can only be made by the coach, based on the verbal and non-verbal information received from the athlete, his/her own knowledge and experience.

It is very important to know, that the parents have a strong influence on the coach-athlete relationship. The education that they give to their children in connection to the respect for the teacher, the coach, following of certain rules and building discipline is the basis for the development of a strong character of a responsible person with clear principles and moral. Parents need to be a good example of all these things, understanding that the specialist who trains their children should be an authority and they have no right to interfere directly in his/her work. It is imperative that the parents fully believe in the professionalism of the coach and if they have questions to try to find a suitable way to receive an answer without affecting their child's attitude towards his/her coach. So far, there is insufficient information in the scientific literature about how parents influence their children's performance in the sport and on child's attitudes towards the training process or the coach. It is interesting to see in which moment the parents more hinder than assist.

### **Conclusion**

The questionnaire developed was readily accessible and applicable in the practice and revealed a part of the general picture of the psychological situation in the training process. The analysis of the specialized literature shows that most of the coaches do not appreciate well that their facial expression, gesture, manner of communication directly affects the psyche, attitude to the coach and the training process, as well as the performance. The results from the questionnaire provoke the opinion that elite athletes, competing on a high professional level in the rhythmic gymnastics strongly believe in the

methodology of their coach, have a strong emotional connection with him/her, but always declare their own character and personality and probably this is the reason they are different from others.

## References

- Aliaga, M., & Gunderson B. (2000). *Interactive Statistics*. Saddle River.
- Avci, K. S., Çepikkurt, F., & Kale, E. K. (2018). Examination of the Relationship between Coach-Athlete Communication Levels and Perceived Motivational Climate for Volleyball Players. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 6(2), 346-353.
- Chelladurai, P. (1990). Leadership in sports: A review. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 21, 328-354.
- Côté, J., & Gilbert, W. (2009). An integrative definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise. *International Journal of Sport Science and Coaching*, 4, 307-232.
- Davis, L., & Jowett, S. (2014). Coach–Athlete attachment and the quality of the coach athlete relationship: Implications for athlete’s well-being. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 32(15), 1454–1464.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2002). *Handbook of self-determination research*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- DeFreese, J., & Smith, A. L. (2014). Athlete social support, negative social interactions, and psychological health across a competitive sport season. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 36(6), 619–630.
- Dominteanu T., (2014). The Significance of The Coach–Athlete Relationship. *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, 4(7), 512-513.
- Hampson, R., & Jowett, S. (2014). Effects of coach leadership and coach– Athlete relationship on collective efficacy. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 24(2), 454–460.
- Нанин, Ю. Л., Стамбулов, А. (2017). Athlete-Coach Scale [Ханин, Ю. Л., Стмбулов, А. (2013). Шкала „Тренер-спортсмен“ (In Russian)], In T. V. Ogorodova. *Psychology of sport* [Т. В., Огородова. Психология спорта], Tutorial, Ministry of Education and Science of Russian Federation, Yaroslavy State University P. G. Demidova, Litres, ISBN 5040114508, 9785040114504.
- Iancheva, T., & Prodanov, G. (2018). Influence of emotional intelligence on coaching efficacy expectations among football coaches. *Journal of Applied Sports Sciences*, 2, 59 – 72.
- Isoard-Gauthier, S., Trouilloud, D., Gustafsson, H., & Guillet-Descas, E. (2016). Associations between the perceived quality of the coach–Athlete relationship and athlete burnout: An examination of the mediating role of achievement goals. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 22, 210-217.
- Jowett, S., & Cockerill, I. M. (2003). Olympic medallists’ perspective of the athlete–coach relationship. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 4, 313–331.
- Jowett, S., Paull, G., & Pensgaard, A. M. (2005). Coach–athlete relationship. Applying sport psychology: Four perspectives. J. T. G. S. Wilson. Champaign, IL, Human Kinetics.
- Jowett, S. (2006). Inter personal and structural features of Greek coach–athlete dyads performing in individual sports. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 18, 69-81.
- Jowett, S. (2002). *The Coach–Athlete Relationship Questionnaire and dyad maps manual* (Research Monograph No. 1). Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University, School of Health.
- Jowett, S. (2003). When the honeymoon is over: A case study of a coach–athlete relationship in crisis. *The Sport Psychologist*, 17, 444–460.
- Lafrenière, M. A. K., Jowett, S., Vallerand, R. J., & Carbonneau, N. (2011). Passion for coaching and the quality of the coacheathlete relationship: The mediating role of coaching behaviors. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 12, 144-152.
- Lyle, J. (1999). Coaching philosophy and coaching behavior, In N. Cross and J. Lyle (eds.). *The Coaching Process: Principles and Practice for Sport*, Oxford: Butterworth- Heineman, 25-46.
- Mageau, G. A., & Vallerand, R. J. (2003). The coacheathlete relationship: a motivational model. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 21, 883-904.
- McCready, G. (1984). The coach as a developer of human resources. *Sports*, 3, 1-6.
- Myers, N. D., Chase, M. A., Beauchamp, M. R., & Jackson, B. (2010). The coaching competency scale II – High School Teams. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 70, 477-494.
- Wylleman, P. (2000). Interpersonal relationships in sport: Uncharted territory in sport psychology research. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 31, 555–572.