

## **On Understanding the Nature of Interpersonal Conflict between Coaches and Athletes**

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# 1    **On Understanding the Nature of Interpersonal Conflict between** 2    **Coaches and Athletes**

3        Conflict is a part of coach-athlete relationships and should be carefully  
 4        considered as it can have effects on the quality of coaching and the level of  
 5        performance. Despite its practical relevance, there is a dearth of research  
 6        around coach-athlete conflict. Therefore, the current study aimed to  
 7        explore the characteristics and topics of conflict, as well as coaches and  
 8        athletes' emotional, cognitive and behavioural experiences during conflict.  
 9        A total of 22 independent coaches and athletes participated in semi-  
 10       structured interviews evolving around the nature of interpersonal conflict.  
 11       After all interviews were transcribed, a deductive-inductive content  
 12       analysis was conducted. This was guided by the interview schedule as well  
 13       as the by the conceptual framework of conflict in sport relationships  
 14       (Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2017). Data were divided into five main  
 15       categories: Conflict characteristics and conflict topics, as well as conflict  
 16       cognitions, emotions, and behaviours. Findings highlighted the variety of  
 17       ways in which participants understood and interpreted interpersonal  
 18       conflict and how their impressions of conflict influenced its evolving  
 19       process. Considering the participants' cognitive, emotional and  
 20       behavioural expressions of conflict, it became apparent that conflict can be  
 21       described through uncertain, escalating and problem-orientated responses.  
 22       Practical applications concerning (mal-) adaptive responses to conflict are  
 23       discussed. (199/200)

24       Keywords: coach-athlete relationship, disagreement, communication

## 25    **Introduction**

26    The coach-athlete relationship is thought to be at the “heart of coaching” (Jowett  
 27    & Shanmugam, 2016). Previous research has mainly addressed the benefits of  
 28    positive, harmonious and stable coach-athlete partnerships that promote  
 29    performances in training and competition (Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006;  
 30    Poczwadowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002), and enhance athletes' confidence,

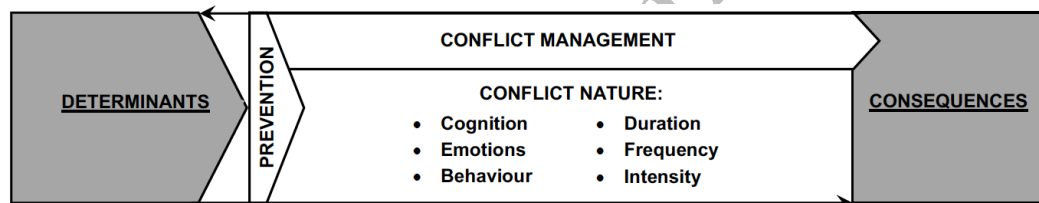
31 motivation, and well-being (e.g., Adie & Jowett, 2010; Davis & Jowett, 2014;  
32 Jowett, 2008). While this research collectively suggests that high quality  
33 relationships are associated with positive outcomes, limited research has explored  
34 the consequences of less functional coach-athlete relationships marked with  
35 conflict and dispute (e.g., Jowett, 2003).

36 While there is evidence to suggest that negative coaching, including  
37 controlling, intimidating, and degrading behaviours, leads to low athlete  
38 satisfaction, sport commitment, performance and mental health (e.g.,  
39 Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thorgerson-Ntoumani, 2009; Gearity & Murray,  
40 2011; Hodge, Lonsdale, & Ng, 2008; Shanmugam, Jowett, & Meyer, 2014), there  
41 is also evidence to suggest that conflict increases within coach-athlete  
42 relationships that lack respect, trust, commitment and co-operation (Jowett, 2003,  
43 2009). Previous findings suggest that conflict within coach-athlete dyads may be  
44 promoted by relationship factors, such as insufficient communication, poor  
45 leadership or unequal power distributions (e.g., Greenleaf, Gould, & Diefenbach,  
46 2001; Jowett, 2003; Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008). Conflict experienced in coach-  
47 athlete dyads often seems to reflect divergent expectations and a general  
48 breakdown of exchanges, leading to negative responses such as decreased  
49 satisfaction, motivation and relationship effectiveness (e.g., Jowett, 2003; Jowett  
50 & Carpenter, 2015). Such findings are consistent with Mellalieu, Shearer, and  
51 Shearer's (2013) research which assessed determinants, nature and outcomes of  
52 interpersonal conflict during major sport competitions. Results indicated that  
53 conflict occurred due to communication breakdowns or power struggles and led to  
54 positive, neutral and negative consequences in terms of emotions, cognition, and  
55 performance.

Although only few studies touch upon the construct of interpersonal conflict in sport, a handful of studies have been carried out focusing on intra-group conflict (e.g., Leo, Gonzalez-Ponce, Sanchez-Miguel, Ivarsson, & Garcia-Calvo, 2015; Paradis, Carron, & Martin, 2014; Partridge & Knapp, 2016). In line with Mellalieu et al. (2013) and the general conflict literature (e.g., Barki & Hartwick, 2004), these studies describe intra-team conflict by negative emotions (e.g., frustration, anger), thoughts (e.g., blame, disagreement) and behaviours (e.g., screaming, ignoring). Intra-team conflict has, moreover, been divided into task and social conflict (e.g., Holt, Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012; Paradis et al., 2014a). While task conflict usually concerns aspects of the sport including performance, social conflict refers to relational issues, such as mutual dislike or clashing personalities, and was found to be particularly dysfunctional for relationships (Jehn, 1997).

Following a review of the literature, Wachsmuth, Jowett, and Harwood (2017) define interpersonal conflict in sport as “a situation in which relationship partners perceive a disagreement about, for example, values, needs, opinions or objectives that is manifested through negative cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions” (p. 88). This definition is accompanied by a conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict in sport (see Figure 1). The framework displays conflict as a dynamic process, whereby external, intra- and interpersonal determinants, as well as conflict prevention strategies determine the onset and define the nature of conflict. The nature of conflict, specifically, is described in terms of its content (e.g., sport performance) and characteristics (e.g., intensity, duration), as well as conflict parties’ (e.g., coaches and athletes) emotional, cognitive and behavioural experiences during conflict episodes. According to the framework, it is also

81 proposed that the nature of conflict and conflict management attempts directly  
 82 predict the conflict outcomes (e.g., performance, relationship, wellbeing). This  
 83 theoretically driven conceptualization of interpersonal conflict in sports was put  
 84 forward with the intent to provide the impetus necessary to stimulate research into  
 85 this unexplored area within sport (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). While there is limited  
 86 evidence on the determinants and outcomes of conflict (e.g., Mellalieu et al.,  
 87 2013), empirical information about the nature of interpersonal conflict in sport  
 88 barely exists. The current study aims to fill this gap by investigating the nature of  
 89 coach-athlete conflict by exploring the following research questions: 1) What are  
 90 the characteristics and topics of coach-athlete conflict?, and 2) What are the  
 91 cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes experienced during conflict?



92  
 93 *Figure 1. Conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships,*  
 94 *adapted from Wachsmuth et al., 2017*

## 95 **Method**

### 96 ***Participants***

97 A total of 22 coaches and athletes participated in the study based on the following  
 98 criteria: a) participants had to be at least 18 years of age, b) they previously  
 99 experienced conflict in coach-athlete relationships, and c) they participated at a  
 100 national performance level or higher. Data saturation was reached after eleven  
 101 coaches (9 male, 2 female) and eleven athletes (4 male, 7 female) were  
 102 interviewed (see Table 1). All individuals lived in the UK and were fluent English  
 103 speakers; three participants originated from Canada, Romania, and Slovenia.

104 *Table 1. Participants demographics*

	Coaches		Athletes	
	<i>National</i>	<i>Internat.***</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>Internat.****</i>
Individual*	0	3	4	4
Team**	3	5	1	2
<i>M<sub>age</sub></i>	45.80 years ( $\pm 10.81$ )		24.45 years ( $\pm 3.31$ )	
<i>M<sub>experience</sub></i>	22.91 years ( $\pm 12.95$ )		13.09 years ( $\pm 6.19$ )	

105 *Notes:*106 *\* Individual sports: gymnastics, swimming, athletics, trampoline, canoeing;*107 *\*\* Team sports: rugby, cricket, volleyball, curling, netball & field hockey;*108 *\*\*\*Breakdown coaches: 8 at World Cup level of which 5 coached Para-/Olympic level athletes;*109 *\*\*\*\* Breakdown athletes: 6 competed in international competitions (e.g., Nation Cups and*  
110 *Commonwealth Games) of which 3 participated also at World Cup level*111 ***Data collection procedure***

112 Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the researchers'  
113 institution. Potential interviewees were then approached via a standardized email  
114 informing them about the purpose of the study, requirements of participation and  
115 ethical considerations. Meetings took place at a mutually convenient time and  
116 location; participants were asked to give informed consent and made aware that  
117 the interview was audio-recorded. Demographic data (e.g., age, gender, sport) was  
118 accessed with a brief questionnaire. As this research forms part of a larger project,  
119 in this manuscript only data focused on the characteristics, nature and content of  
120 conflict are presented. Overall, the semi-structured interview contained 26  
121 questions covering five areas: sport experience, the personal meaning of conflict,  
122 specific experiences of conflict, determining factors, and consequences; eight of  
123 the 26 questions were relevant for this manuscript.

124 At the start of the interview, coaches and athletes were encouraged to

125 share insights about their personal development within sports and experiences in  
 126 different coach-athlete relationships in order to build rapport with the interviewee.  
 127 They were further asked what conflict meant for them personally to establish a  
 128 shared understanding about the concept between researchers and participant (e.g.,  
 129 “What does coach-athlete conflict mean to you?”). Next, various topics of conflict  
 130 were explored, thus, stimulating participants’ recall of multiple situations in which  
 131 they experienced conflict (e.g., “What is conflict with your coach/athlete  
 132 generally about?”). This was important as the following section focused on a  
 133 specific conflict event which the interviewee identified as significant and  
 134 described in rich detail (e.g., “Please think back to a situation in which you  
 135 experienced conflict with your coach/athlete, can you find a specific event that  
 136 you recall vividly? Tell me about it.”; “What was the topic?”; “How did you  
 137 experience the conflict?”). Afterwards, participants were asked more specific  
 138 questions, for example, about the nature of conflict (e.g., “What are typical  
 139 behaviours you show during conflict?”, “In your experience, what types of  
 140 conflict are more/less severe?”) in which they could draw on various conflict  
 141 experiences. Finally, coaches and athletes were invited to share any other thoughts  
 142 on the topic. Overall, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for a  
 143 degree of flexibility (e.g., Sparkes & Smith, 2014) enabling the researcher to  
 144 prompt the given information appropriately without interrupting the flow of the  
 145 conversation. When it became evident that data saturation was reached and no  
 146 new information emerged from the interviews, data collection was terminated  
 147 (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours 15  
 148 minutes ( $M_{coaches} = 80.0$  min;  $M_{athletes} = 73.00$  min) and added up to 888 pages of  
 149 double-spaced transcript, approximately 25% of the data was relevant to the

150 current study.

### 151 ***Data analysis***

152 A “directed content analysis” approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was utilized to  
 153 examine all interviews individually, followed by a cross-case analysis of all  
 154 participants. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) a directed approach to  
 155 content analyses aims to “extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory”  
 156 (p. 1281). Such an approach aligns with the present study as it aimed to  
 157 corroborate and further extend the conceptual framework of conflict in sport  
 158 relationships (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). This framework provided a rudimentary  
 159 coding scheme for data analyses. Subsequently, the coding scheme included the  
 160 main categories: conflict characteristics and topics, as well as emotional, cognitive  
 161 and behavioural responses. Sub-categories were added inductively throughout the  
 162 analytical process (cf., Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krane, Andersen, & Streaan,  
 163 1997). A combination of a deductive and inductive analyses allowed the authors  
 164 to make sense of the participants’ accounts by drawing parallels to existing  
 165 findings (e.g., Mellalieu et al., 2013) as well as by adding further insights and  
 166 details around the phenomenon under study.

167 The data analyses followed guidelines established in research (e.g., Hsieh  
 168 & Shannon, 2005). First, the principal researcher listened to and read all  
 169 interviews carefully to become fully familiar with the data. Second, relevant  
 170 extracts were identified and grouped according to the categories of the coding  
 171 scheme; this process has been called “deductive category application” (Mayring,  
 172 2000, cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Third, general categories were then  
 173 further divided into sub-categories to provide a more meaningful analysis of the  
 174 data (e.g., topics of conflict; valence of emotions; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

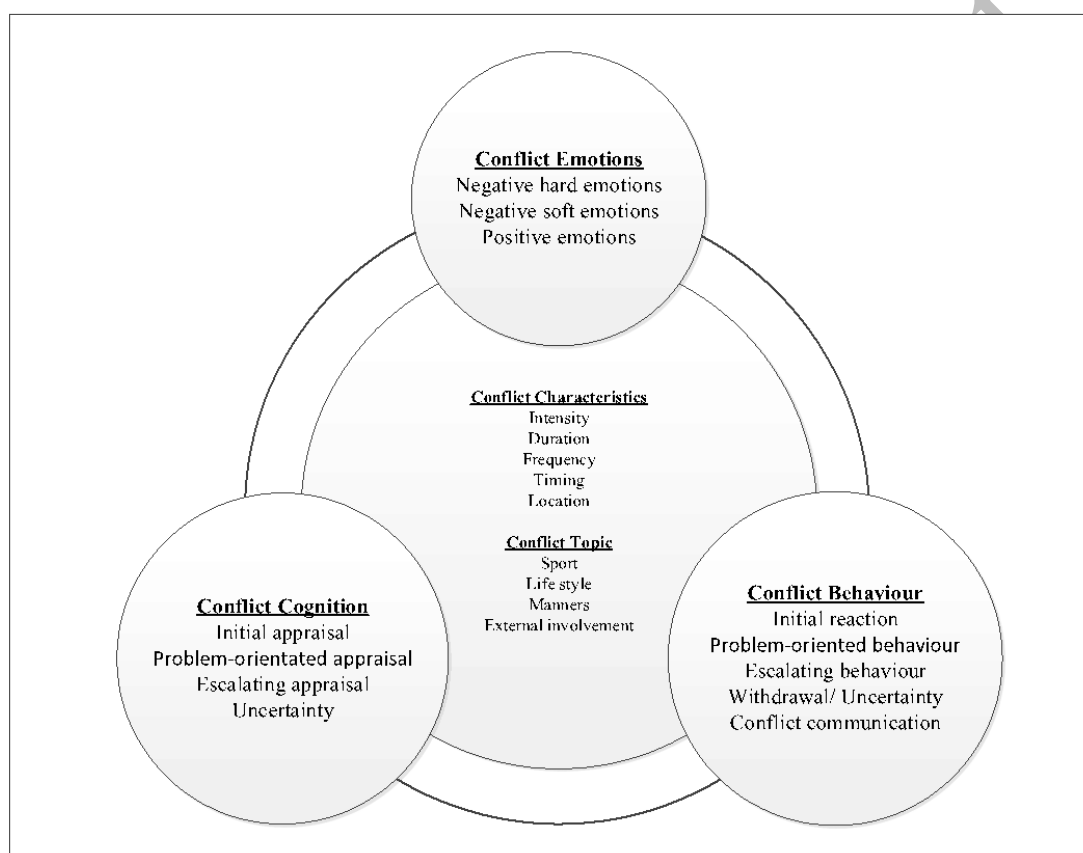


175 Fourth, the identified categories were mapped out to facilitate a deeper  
176 understanding of the data, its meaning and interconnectedness (Coffey &  
177 Atkinson, 1996). This final stage of sense making allowed the authors to draw  
178 conclusions upon the underlying processes of interpersonal conflict in coach-  
179 athlete dyads.

180 Tracey's (2010) criteria for excellent qualitative research (e.g., worthy  
181 topic, rigour, credibility, ethics) were followed to ensure high quality standards of  
182 the current study. Though limited space prevents an in-depth discussion of all  
183 criteria, essential points referring to rich rigour and credibility are addressed.  
184 Accordingly, an established stream of research into a) coach-athlete relationships  
185 (e.g., Jowett, 2003, 2008, 2009) as well as b) interpersonal conflict (e.g., Barki &  
186 Hartwick, 2004; Wachsmuth et al., 2017) provided the theoretical foundations for  
187 the design of the current study. Additionally, data was collected from diverse  
188 participants (e.g., coaches/athletes; team/individual sport) with experience in the  
189 area of inquiry (i.e., conflict). Thus, the gathered data offered rich accounts on the  
190 phenomenon under study which is reflected within the quotes provided in this  
191 manuscript. Credibility of the data analysis was further facilitated by the  
192 involvement of the co-authors who acted as critical peers by offering different  
193 perspectives and challenging the explanations and perceptions of the first author.  
194 Dissensions resulting from this process were resolved by critical discussion as  
195 well as by consulting conflict literature outside of sport (e.g., Fincham, Bradbury,  
196 & Grych, 1990; Sanford, 2012). Overall, the current research provides a  
197 meaningful contribution to the literature by forwarding a detailed understanding  
198 of coach-athlete conflict with significant practical implications.

## 199 Results

200 Data were divided into the five main categories (Figure 2) describing the nature of  
 201 conflict by its *characteristics* and content (*topics*), as well as by *cognitive*,  
 202 *emotional* and *behavioural* aspects that were linked to the process of conflict.  
 203 Findings are illustrated using codes with examples as well as descriptive evidence  
 204 as it has been recommended by Hsieh and Shannon (2005).



205  
 206  
 207 *Figure 2: The categories and sub-categories describing the nature of conflict in*  
 208 *coach-athlete relationships.*

## 209 Conflict characteristics

210 Participants described that interpersonal conflict ranged from mild to severe  
 211 (*intensity*), from lasting a short while (minutes) to long-term and ongoing  
 212 (months, years; *duration*), and from occurring barely ever to nearly every day

213 (*frequency*; all deductive). Athlete 1 noticed that “most of [conflict] comes in the  
 214 build-up, in practice, cause you spend 95% of your time training with your coach  
 215 and there is just that 5% in the competition.” However, both coaches and athletes,  
 216 felt that conflict was likely to occur after competitions, especially when  
 217 expectations were not met. Further, conflicts occurred at all times of the season  
 218 (*timing*) and seemed to take place in various *locations* (both inductive), for  
 219 example, training grounds, the competition venue, in meetings, equipment rooms  
 220 and even in public (e.g., car park). Athlete 8 reported that conflict took place via  
 221 phone and email. Lastly, participants described the succession of events over time  
 222 leading to conflict onset, escalation and/or management:

223           It was alright to start with, then it got terrible, to the point where we barely  
 224           talked. I just decided to not work with that coach anymore, and we didn't  
 225           really formally say anything, I just started working on my own. (A9)

## 226 ***Conflict topics***

227 Participants perceived some conflicts as trivial (e.g., time management) and others  
 228 as crucial (e.g., injury) for the coach-athlete relationship, and as such directly  
 229 linked the conflict topic to its severity and process. Four different sub-categories  
 230 of conflict topics emerged inductively from the participants' reports: the majority  
 231 of conflicts concerned *sport-* and *lifestyle-related* topics, whereas some conflicts  
 232 related to individuals' *misconduct* and the *involvement of external parties*.

233           *Sport-related* conflict topics were perceived to be directly linked to either,  
 234 performance in practice or competition and included feedback, training schedules/  
 235 goals and load, injuries, individual ambitions, team selection and performance.  
 236 Also, role expectations and their fulfilment were a topic of concern:

237           Communication was a big one [...] if I text the coach, I expect a reply and if  
 238           I don't get a reply, that's a massive problem. [...] if people were dropped  
 239           from a game if that's not communicated [...] if people are not working hard  
 240           in training or in matches and it's not picked up on, there's no point. (A4)

241   Further, *lifestyle-related* topics were recognized as a significant area of conflict  
 242   between coaches and athletes. They concerned behaviours manifested outside the  
 243   sport environment, however, they were thought to impact performance. On one  
 244   hand, athlete behaviours included poor nutrition, alcohol consumption or public  
 245   misbehaviour, and on the other hand coach behaviours included over-involvement  
 246   with private decisions (e.g., university, work). For example. Athlete 2 reported:

247           [Coach] tries to take [private life] away from me, makes it part of our  
 248           relationship when it should be outside, work is something different to  
 249           [sport], family, friends, but then [coach] almost tries to incooperate it.

250   Additionally, conflict arose as a result of *misconduct*; behaviours that were  
 251   perceived as disrespectful or inappropriate included, for example, being late,  
 252   physical aggression and “if people were lying” (C2), or “clashed with [each  
 253   other’s] core values” (C6), as well as behaviours that targeted the other conflict  
 254   party on a personal level. Sometimes these conflicts arose out of unresolved sport-  
 255   related disagreements, thus, Coach 7 explained a sport- and lifestyle-related  
 256   conflict which escalated over time due to an athlete’s misconduct:

257           I said to him “You know, you blatantly lied to me, you told me you’ve done  
 258           it running and you haven’t done it running” you know, “We talked about  
 259           your behaviours and your conduct and whether they were appropriate for  
 260           what you are trying to achieve and you then were still going out and getting  
 261           drunk and this resulted in you doing this [injury]. I gonna make a  
 262           recommendation that you are taken off the programme.”

263

264 Lastly, some participants mentioned conflict could occur due to the involvement  
 265 of third parties, such as NGBs, other coaches or life partners as reported by Coach  
 266 10 who described a dispute being “about potential external influences from a life  
 267 partner.” Additionally, coach 5 pointed towards conflicts arising due to other  
 268 clubs trying to poach players stating that:

269       The guys are aspiring to play premiership rugby, so they get like drawn on  
 270       by these clubs, and sudden like a drop form the heart, they are like “I can't  
 271       make training tonight, I'm training with [club]” and “How long have you  
 272       known? We wanna help you with this, but you just ditched us within a drop  
 273       of the heart” [...] external factors like that - it's like anything in the world, the  
 274       packing order, the above us they click their fingers and these guys go ...

### 275 ***Conflict cognition***

276 Conflict *cognition* represents thought processes that occur during conflict and are  
 277 linked to evaluations of the conflict situations. They may lead to conflict  
 278 escalation or facilitate an initiation of conflict management. It is conflict cognition  
 279 that captures thoughts that promote and hinder conflict management; all sub-  
 280 categories are a result of inductive data analyses.

281       Participants described how *initial appraisal* of the situation left them often  
 282 uncertain about the implications of a conflict event, doubting “What can I do?”  
 283 (A10), thinking negatively of the other, helpless, insecure or worried. For  
 284 instance, Coach 6 wondered “Did she use me to get here?”

285       During this evaluation process individuals ascribed the conflict experience  
 286 to a specific source (*attribution*). Thus, conflict was either attributed internally to  
 287 oneself (e.g., admitting a mistake), to the conflict partner (e.g., blaming) or both,  
 288 as well as to external circumstances (e.g., stress due to an upcoming competition  
 289 or travelling). The initial attribution often differed from an attribution made at a

290 later point of time during conflict. For example, Coach 6 described a specific  
 291 conflict with an athlete, she initially reasoned that the difficulties they had were  
 292 due to mental health issues, though subsequently she reasoned the lack of effort  
 293 was at the heart of the problems they had. The coach said “I thought it's because  
 294 of [athlete] learning behaviours and learning difficulties, and you really got to  
 295 help the best in that, but actually they're [expected characteristics] not there.”

296 Following this first appraisal of the conflict, participants explained on how  
 297 this preliminary reflection influenced their behaviour. For example, a negative  
 298 evaluation of the situation often seemed to lead to further conflict escalating  
 299 behaviours and ineffective communication strategies. In turn, a conflict *escalating*  
 300 *appraisal* was linked to disbelief, a perception of unfair treatment, “personal  
 301 attack” (C6), or blaming the other conflict party for the conflict:

302 I felt like he'd been unfair cause we had no idea what was going on, but  
 303 he obviously, he did feel, like I can understand why he'd be annoyed if he  
 304 thought that other people had heard because he'd see that as undermining  
 305 him which is fair enough. (A6)

306 *Uncertainty*, on the other hand, was linked to withdrawal behaviours and was  
 307 experienced by most athletes as worry and doubt about oneself, the other and/or  
 308 the relationship; Athlete 5 described “I always felt not important enough, like  
 309 ‘you are not good enough for me to be seen with you.’” Similarly, few coaches  
 310 contemplated their influence upon the individual or even team, like Coach 4 who  
 311 said “I thought a few weeks ago that potentially I had lost the changing room and  
 312 when you lose the changing room it's not a pleasant environment.” Lastly, a  
 313 constructive *problem-orientated appraisal*, emphasized especially by coaches,  
 314 was associated with an attempt to minimize conflict, and included thought  
 315 processes such as considering the importance of the topic, prioritizing goals as

316 well as taking the conflict partners' perspective or being concerned about the  
 317 other's feelings. For example, coach 5 expressed empathy for an athlete thinking  
 318 that "he is just angry and quite upset [...] because it's a big deal for this guy, he's  
 319 missing out and lashing out, it's the final."

### 320 ***Conflict emotion***

321 Conflict emotion describes affective responses that individuals experience during  
 322 interpersonal conflict. Emotions were linked to conscious and subconscious  
 323 cognitive processes and served as a barometer to conflict escalation. Guided by  
 324 the data it was noticeable that these conflict-related emotions were distinguished  
 325 in three categories: *negative hard emotions*, *negative soft emotions* and *positive*  
 326 *emotions* (inductive; see Sanford, 2012). Participants referred to different  
 327 emotional experiences during conflict. Negative emotions seemed to range from  
 328 hard, associated with power and selfishness (e.g., "I was quite annoyed, I was a  
 329 bit boiling" - C2), to soft emotions, associated with pro-social orientations and  
 330 vulnerability (e.g., "I was just more gutted for him" – C4). Overall, the negative  
 331 emotions experienced during conflict varied from strong, acute feelings (e.g.,  
 332 anger, panic) to ongoing frustration, resentment and worry. Especially, athletes  
 333 mentioned how they became nervous or anxious in interpersonal exchanges with  
 334 the coach in practice session and/or in meetings. Moreover, participants frequently  
 335 reported feelings of regret as a consequence of conflict. Coach 7, for example,  
 336 described that the athlete "was very remorseful and recognized that [he] failed me  
 337 as well as failing themselves."

338         Some positive emotions were also experienced with conflict situations.  
 339 While some coaches felt calm and collected, like Coach 9 who stated "I was quiet,  
 340 I was in control, quite calm, quite okay.", athletes reported feeling relieved and

341 reassured. Athlete 3 said “I saw it coming for quite a while, so it was quite a  
 342 release for me.”, and Athlete 6 perceived conflict as a chance to overcome  
 343 communication barriers stating that “it was kinda relief in a way that there is some  
 344 form of ice broken and we could then just discuss it.”

### 345 ***Conflict behaviour***

346 The experienced emotions and cognitions were often accompanied by conflict  
 347 behaviours displaying either *uncertainty*, *escalation*, or *problem-orientation*.  
 348 These were mainly expressed through active *communication* processes between  
 349 coaches and athletes during the time of conflict (all inductive). What seemed to  
 350 make a difference in the development of conflict was not the one person who  
 351 initiated it, but *how* the other person responded.

352 Thus, participants reported behaviours that prevented conflict from  
 353 escalating by actively approaching the problem (*problem-orientation*). For  
 354 example, Coach 1 reported “I asked her to explain what she meant with  
 355 inconsistencies, and I tried to explain to her that this was my thought process and  
 356 she was absolutely entitled to disagree.” It was evident from the interviews that  
 357 coaches tended to react in a more controlled manner and either stepped away from  
 358 the problem or facilitated rational thinking in the early stages.

359 In contrast, athletes’ reactions could be described as more negative and  
 360 less adaptive or skilful; behaviours included crying, refusing to talk, making  
 361 irrational excuses, shouting, answering back or not adhering to instructions.  
 362 Athlete 9 said “I would just say ‘Okay’ and do my own thing, avoid doing that  
 363 thing [...] or I wouldn't do it to my full ability.” However, there were also times in  
 364 which coaches employed less than desirable behaviours by shouting at their  
 365 athletes or using inappropriate language. Such *escalating behaviours* mentioned



366 by participants also included swearing, ignoring the other, involving third parties,  
 367 not taking responsibility or being unwilling during conflict management. Other  
 368 escalating behaviours related to the *communication* style between coaches and  
 369 athletes during conflict: rhetorical questions, a harsh tone, loud voice, and giving  
 370 an opinion in a firm or confident manner and standing up for one's point of view:

371       You're more heated so you're more likely to just say something that, when  
 372       you are thinking rationally, you'd be like "Bit risky to say that", whereas  
 373       when you're upset about something you'd say more because it's almost like  
 374       "Oh they said it because they're upset", so it's easier. (A6)

375 Other examples of less than optimal behaviours related to one's experience of  
 376 *uncertainty* included athletes deciding to neither engage in nor trying to solve the  
 377 problem, but instead withdrawing from the situation. Thus, a common strategy  
 378 among them was to not address the problem, especially if they could not envisage  
 379 a solution. For instance, Athlete 2 explained that their coach "is a very intelligent  
 380 man and whatever you said [coach] would have a comeback for it, so it's just not  
 381 worth it." These behaviours of uncertainty that contained an element of  
 382 resignation, insecurity or vulnerability seemed to worsen conflict, especially  
 383 during a long-lasting conflict. Coach 4 reported "I didn't answer questions well, I  
 384 felt like I was on the back foot, really the baddest of feelings [...] I didn't have an  
 385 answer for him."

## 386 **Discussion**

387 Guided by the framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships  
 388 (Wachsmuth et al., 2017) the current study aimed at understanding the nature of  
 389 coach-athlete conflict. In line with Wachsmuth et al. (2017), the qualitative data  
 390 revealed that when the *topic* of conflict was considered to be significant and the

relationship partner was identified as the source of interference or disagreement, coaches and athletes were likely to manifest *cognitive* (e.g., blame), *emotional* (e.g., anger) and *behavioural* (e.g., shouting) conflict responses which influenced the *characteristics* of conflict. These findings are consistent with the multi-dimensional nature of conflict reported in the literature (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Paradis et al., 2014a, 2014b; Wachsmuth et al., 2017).

### ***Conflict topic and characteristics***

Participants highlighted that the topic of conflict influenced the conflict processes as reflected in the behavioural, emotional and cognitive responses which in turn seemed to be linked to conflict characteristics such as intensity and/or duration. It was reported that deeply rooted or external conflicts (e.g., influence of life partner) intensified the situation and were harder to resolve than internal conflicts (e.g., training load). Four main topics emerged from the participants' reports and included sport- and lifestyle-related topics as well as one's misconduct or manners, and involvement of third parties. Considering the dichotomy provided by Barki and Hartwick (2004), sport- and lifestyle-related topics mainly reflected task conflicts, whereas ones' misconduct and manners reflected social conflicts. Consistent with research in both social and sport psychology (e.g., Amason, 1996; de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Jowett, 2003), the current findings indicate that it was common for task and social conflicts to co-occur and/or merge. Overall, coaches and athletes referred more often to task conflicts than to social conflicts, which contradicts with the findings of Holt and colleagues' who reported a higher number of social conflicts within female sport teams (Holt et al., 2012). Considering that coach-athlete relationships are task purposeful (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) and so coaches and athletes strive for performance

416 achievements often agreed and understood by both, this finding is not too  
 417 surprising. Besides, females operating in team sports emphasize the importance of  
 418 strong personal relationships and thus may create an environment in which social  
 419 conflicts are likely to erupt (Eys et al., 2015). Our study, however, did not  
 420 specifically examine gender differences.

421 Lastly, the setting and time in which conflict arises should be taken into  
 422 account. In contrast to Mellalieu et al. (2013) the current findings indicate that the  
 423 majority of conflict took place within training or individual meetings rather than  
 424 during competition or within social settings. Additionally, it seemed that the time  
 425 of the season influenced the occurrence of conflict. However, more research is  
 426 needed which investigates the determinants and outcomes linked to particular  
 427 conflict characteristics.

#### 428 ***Coaches and athletes' responses to conflict***

429 The current study further extends the existing work on conflict within sport  
 430 relationships, which often presented a positive-negative dichotomy of conflict  
 431 responses (cf. Wachsmuth et al., 2017), by highlighting multiple levels in which  
 432 coaches and athletes processed conflict resulting in diverse behavioural options  
 433 during conflict episodes. An *initial appraisal* to the onset of conflict occurred  
 434 spontaneously and was based on identifying the event as significant (or not) to  
 435 themselves (cf. Fincham et al., 1990). Secondly, a more in-depth evaluation  
 436 followed leading either *escalating*, *uncertain* or *problem-oriented* conflict  
 437 responses. Accordingly, it emerged that attributions of accountability were linked  
 438 to behaviours and emotions experienced. For example, blaming the conflict  
 439 partner was part of an *escalating response* linked to negative hard emotions (e.g.,  
 440 feeling angry) and aggressive behaviours (e.g., yelling), which in turn intensified

441 and prolonged conflict (Holt et al., 2012; Paradis et al., 2014a; Partridge & Knapp,  
442 2016). In addition, a perceived lack of control and influence (e.g., self-doubt) was  
443 linked to withdrawal behaviours and negative soft emotions (e.g., disappointment,  
444 worry), forming *uncertain responses* to conflict. In contrast to previous research  
445 (cf. Wachsmuth et al., 2017), some participants also referred to the experience of  
446 positive emotions (e.g., relief) and attempted to approach the problem at both a  
447 cognitive and behavioural level. This set of experiences and others alike seem to  
448 encompass *problem-orientated responses* to conflict.

449 Overall, the three identified response patterns are in contrast to what  
450 Partridge and Knapp (2016) describes as the manifestation of conflict. In their  
451 study on peer conflict in adolescent sport the authors approach conflict through a  
452 behavioural perspective highlighting victimization at the centre of conflict, while  
453 not considering related emotional and cognitive processes in either victim or  
454 perpetrator. Moreover, the representation of conflict as victimization rather aligns  
455 with bullying or emotional abuse, which indeed may cause or accompany conflict,  
456 but embody distinct concepts (Stirling, 2009). The findings of the current study,  
457 however, indicate that conflict responses of emotions, thoughts and behaviours  
458 appeared to be inextricably interlinked and so one dyad member's responses  
459 fuelled another member's responses, reflecting high interdependency of conflict  
460 partners and as such support the self-reinforcing feedback loop described by  
461 Roberts (2006). In contrast to Roberts, however, this reciprocity seemed to occur  
462 for both, dysfunctional as well as functional responses to conflict. Considering  
463 that problem-oriented responses were primarily shown by coaches; this difference  
464 may be explained by the hierarchical relationship and role expectations (Potrac &  
465 Jones, 2009). However, there is more scope for research in this area.

## 466 *Future directions and conclusion*

467 This study represents the first systematic approach to examining interpersonal  
468 conflict in the context of coach-athlete relationships. Even though initial results  
469 shed light on the complexity of this line of inquiry, there is substantial need for  
470 further investigations. Future research should, for example, advance conflict  
471 knowledge by collecting data from entire coach-athlete dyads as there is initial  
472 evidence within the current data suggesting that perceptions of specific conflict  
473 events differ between them. Additionally, the gender composition, culture and  
474 type of relationship (e.g., typical vs atypical; see Jowett & Meek, 2000) requires  
475 further investigation. In future, different sample characteristics, such as length of  
476 relationship, performance level, sport type or training set-ups (e.g., training  
477 camps, training group) may also be worth investigating. The development of a  
478 psychometric tool to measure the nature of conflict in coach-athlete relationship  
479 may help generate knowledge about its antecedents and consequences employing  
480 cross-sectional, longitudinal and experimental research. Further work that  
481 warrants attention may also target specific questions such as: Are frequent  
482 conflicts detrimental to the partnership between coaches and athletes even if  
483 resolved? How does conflict influence athletes and coaches' wellbeing?

484 In summary, interpersonal conflict presents researchers in sport with a  
485 relatively new theoretical and empirical as well as measurement challenge.

486 Clearly there is ample scope to explore and thus discover. The present study  
487 contributes to this new field of investigation by exploring nature and topics of  
488 conflict. Several recommendations can be concluded that enable practitioners to  
489 approach conflict constructively and as such enhance the effectiveness of coach-  
490 athlete dyads. Conflict is inevitable in any kind of relationships, and thus it is

491 important to increase coaches and athletes' awareness and highlight that while  
492 conflict can be detrimental, it may also be beneficial if it is approached in a  
493 manner that is functional. It has been highlighted how conflict-related cognitions,  
494 emotions, and behaviours manifest both separately and together over time and as  
495 such influence the course of conflict. Thus, responding to conflicts with self-  
496 doubt, insecurity and withdrawal (*uncertain response*), or even angry,  
497 aggressively and self-centred (*escalating response*) may lead to an escalation of  
498 conflict, whereas a more problem-oriented, caring approach connected with a  
499 sense of calmness and relief potentially facilitates coping and conflict  
500 management. Overall, the current study provides a first attempt to closely  
501 investigate conflict between coaches and athletes within the context of their  
502 dyadic relationships and paves the way for enhancing the body of research within  
503 this field.

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