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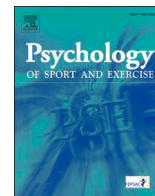
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Exploring the experiences and perceptions of coaches, athletes, and integrated support teams towards the management of three national Paralympic teams

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of coaches, athletes, and integrated support teams towards the management of three Paralympic teams across North America and Europe. Six focus groups with athletes, three interviews with head coaches, and 10 interviews with support team members were conducted and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis. Our analysis resulted in three overarching themes to portray the coaches' role and behaviours in managing their (1) athletes, (2) integrated support teams, and (3) team as a collective unit. All teams were made up of a diverse group of athletes that required individualized considerations regarding age, finances, and disability. Coaches were successful when they fostered autonomy and managed interpersonal conflict by utilizing their integrated support teams to foster cohesiveness. This study provides an in-depth view of the role of the coach in managing national parasport teams by incorporating multiple perspectives from three teams around the world.

1. Introduction

In high-performance sport, head coaches are responsible for facilitating a supportive, safe, and challenging team environment for their athletes and support team to succeed personally and professionally (Mallett & Lara Bercial, 2016; Salcinovic et al., 2022). In many ways, being an effective parasport coach is similar to an effective coach in able-bodied sport, and thus, many of the coaching strategies and behaviours are helpful in both contexts. For example, effective coaches strive to foster success for their athletes on a personal and professional level by instilling confidence, motivation, skill development, goal setting, and proper communication regardless of their athletes' physical ability (Becker, 2009). However, based on the existing literature on coaching parasport athletes from the perspectives of coaches' (e.g., Cregan et al., 2007) and athletes' (Alexander et al., 2020), there are considerations that coaches are expected to be aware of specific to the parasport context (e.g., mechanics of equipment, accessibility constraints; Pomerleau-Fontaine et al., 2023), related to the physical and psychological intersection of disability (e.g., athlete medication, recovery; Alexander et al., 2022), and how this applies to effective

parasport coaching practices.

Many parasport coaches and athletes have highlighted the importance of coaches being creative and open to new ideas regarding their coaching practices (Alexander et al., 2020; Cregan et al., 2007; McMaster et al., 2012). For example, Alexander et al. (2020) explored the coaching preferences of eight female Paralympic athletes who expressed their desire for coaches to be open to alternative strategies when dealing with equipment and to think outside of the box when determining the most effective performance-related strategy. In doing so, athletes discussed having frequent conversations with their coaches about what worked and what did not. Based on these notions, implementing autonomy-supportive behaviours (e.g., increased sense of opportunities for athlete decision-making) may be particularly important in the parasport context to acknowledge the range of functional impairment (e.g., disability) and how that may influence the adaptation of fixed or standard training programs (Banack et al., 2011; Cheon et al., 2015; Tawse et al., 2012). Finally, research has identified the importance for coaches to be knowledgeable of their athletes' disabilities (Alexander et al., 2020; Cregan et al., 2007). For example, Cregan et al. (2007) found that learning about the varying types of disabilities and

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how to effectively communicate with the athletes' caregivers and support workers were important steps in their own learning process. As well, the importance of using the athlete as a source of knowledge in the coaching process was identified, especially since there were limited coaching resources for athletes with a disability (i.e., manuals, clinics, seminars) at that time.

Although a large proportion of parasport literature has focused on individual sport environments (e.g., Cheon et al., 2015; Cregan et al., 2007; Duarte & Culver, 2014), there is a growing body of empirical research on coaching in a team setting (e.g., Allan et al., 2020; Falcão et al., 2015; Tawse et al., 2012). For example, Falcão et al. (2015) interviewed seven Paralympic coaches who emphasized the importance of social support within the parasport setting due to challenges that athletes may experience more frequently, such as transportation or personal care issues, and therefore turn to their teammates for task completion and emotional encouragement. Due to the perceived importance of team cohesion, the coaches reported organizing team building activities to help develop and strengthen cohesion (Falcão et al., 2015). Additionally, Allan et al. (2020) interviewed 21 male and female recreational to international level athletes with a congenital or acquired disability to explore athlete perceptions of coaching effectiveness in parasport. Among the findings, athletes desired team sport coaches who valued and promoted an inclusive environment, which often included a number of team bonding or social activities. Effective coaches were identified as those who supported their athletes by ensuring their level of functioning did not interfere with their participation in team functions and activities (Allan et al., 2020). Together, coaches played an important role in fostering team cohesion and athlete well-being in the parasport setting.

Coaching in the high-performance setting has been described as "highly relational" in which building quality relationships are critical to success (Allen & Muir, 2020, p. 179). To examine the relational nature of coaching, Jowett and Poczwadowski (2007) created the 3+1Cs model that defined the coach-athlete relationship as a reciprocal process based on mutual understanding of thoughts, behaviours, and values. The strength of the coach-athlete relationship was outlined through the constructs of closeness (i.e., feelings of emotional and personal characteristics based on mutual trust and respect), commitment (i.e., the mutual belief that the relationship will be maintained and continued), co-orientation (i.e., levels of interdependence within the relationship), and complementarity (i.e., cooperation and collaboration amongst parties). Positive perceptions of the 3+1Cs have been associated with strong coach-athlete relationships as well as athlete satisfaction, development, and performance in the high-performance sport setting (Foulds et al., 2019; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Pomerleau-Fontaine et al., 2023). The 3+1Cs model has largely been used to explore coach-athlete relationships in the able-bodied setting (Henderson et al., 2023, *in press*), however researchers are beginning to use this model to explore coaching relationships in the parasport setting. For example, Pomerleau-Fontaine et al. (2023) interviewed six wheelchair basketball athletes on their coach-athlete relationships and found that athletes valued when their coaches built a relationship based on trust (i.e., closeness) and had the knowledge and willingness to adapt their coaching to their equipment needs (i.e., complementarity). They also expressed frustration or a lack of commitment to their coaches when they displayed negative coaching behaviours (i.e., commitment) and felt understood and supported by coaches with similar lived experiences with disability (i.e., co-orientation). As such, there appeared to be parasport-specific interactions and experiences between coaches and athletes that have the potential to influence the effectiveness and success of their coach-athlete relationships.

Within the high-performance environment, there is the need for coaches to manage and utilize members of their integrated support team, such as, but not limited to, assistant coaches, physiotherapists, medical doctors, and strength and conditioning coaches (Armstrong et al., 2022; Mallett & Lara Bercial, 2016; Meckbach et al., 2023;

Urquhart et al., 2020). For instance, Meckbach et al. (2023) conducted a 21-month case study on the 2018 Swedish FIFA World Cup team to understand the national head coaches' role in selecting and developing support teams. Interviews with various members of the team, including the head coach, team manager, assistant coaches, mentors, performance analysts, sport psychologists, and scouts, highlighted how the head coach carefully selected all members of his staff to ensure they were in line with his vision and values (e.g., candor, community, humility) to create a psychologically safe and collaborative team climate. Similarly, Armstrong et al. (2022) interviewed five Canadian hockey general managers who all noted the importance of finding a strong team of support members (e.g., assistant general managers, scouting staff, coaching staff, family billets) that were aligned with the team's values. In the parasport setting, there are a number of stakeholders involved in the development of athletes that coaches may need to consider, including peers, parents, romantic partners, and rehabilitation specialists (Allan et al., 2018; Javorina et al., 2020; Lefebvre et al., 2021). Additionally, there may also be guides to assist athletes who are visually impaired (Bundon & Mannella, 2022), sport physiotherapists who have disability-specific knowledge on injury prevention and rehabilitation (Fagher et al., 2021), classifiers to provide athletes with classification levels to compete in parasport competitions (Patatas et al., 2020), or equipment managers to aid with knowledge of parasport-specific equipment (Lepage et al., 2020). Collectively, there are several individuals and contextual considerations that are unique to parasport that may be considered when managing a high-performance team environment, and as Falcão et al. (2015) stated, "to our knowledge, no research has addressed the role of athlete support personnel in team functioning in Paralympic sport and how these individuals can affect cohesion" (p. 217).

2. Rationale and purpose of study

Compared to the coaching literature conducted in able-bodied sport on the development of successful teams (Mallett & Lara Bercial, 2016; Urquhart et al., 2020), high-performance parasport coaching has received significantly less attention (Bentzen et al., 2021). This is unfortunate considering the unique elements of the high-performance parasport environment, such as the integration of athletes with varying sport classifications and functional ability levels (Dehghansai et al., 2020), the two-way communication needed to understand athletes' physical capacities (Alexander et al., 2022), monitoring mental health and stress at the Paralympic Games (Bentzen et al., 2022), and contextual factors such as equipment, funding, and safety considerations (Pomerleau-Fontaine et al., 2023). The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of coaches, athletes, and integrated support teams towards the management of national Paralympic teams. The main research questions guiding this study were: (1) What is the role of the head coach in managing high-performance parasport teams? and (2) What coaching considerations do head coaches, athletes, and integrated support teams have towards the management of national Paralympic teams?

3. Methods

3.1. Philosophical assumptions

Our study was conceptualized and implemented within an interpretivist paradigm and guided by a subjective and transactional epistemology (i.e., knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participants within social interactions) and a relativist ontology (i.e., multiple realities exist and are understood; Poucher et al., 2020). Within this context, we sought to gain an understanding of national team environments within the parasport setting without seeking one "correct" or "best" answer to our research questions. Instead, we situated ourselves within the landscape of high-performance parasport, both in the

physical space of the training environment as well as the literature on parasport coaching, to co-construct interpretations of the role of the head coach in managing team environments. In the same way, it was not our intention to contrast results based on country of origin, as each of the three countries have unique sport structures as well as organizational and contextual considerations. Due to the co-construction of data, our findings are a collective understanding of our identities, lived experiences, and assumptions as researchers and practitioners, and therefore, it is important to outline who we are. Notably, all authors identify as able-bodied. The first author is a female postdoctoral fellow with eight years of experience conducting research on parasport coaching as well as practical experience coaching children and adults with disabilities in the sport and physical activity context. The second author developed an internationally recognized research program related to the knowledge, strategies, and behaviours employed by coaches, including in the parasport context, as well as mental performance consulting experience with Paralympic athletes and teams. The third author is a female Associate Professor with both research interests and teaching experience regarding adapted physical activity, participation in sport for people with disabilities, and mental health among elite parasport athletes. The fourth author is a researcher with extensive experience within high-performance sport, including building and leading the sport psychology staff at the Paralympic Games in London 2012 and working on-site at the Paralympics in Sochi 2014.

3.2. Participants and procedures

Following ethical approval at the lead researcher's institution, we recruited three summer national Paralympic teams that were based on personal contacts of the research team. Situated in either Europe or North America, our eligibility criteria included teams: (1) who were co-acting sports, (2) who competed in the Summer Paralympic Games (due to timing of data collection), (3) of approximately the same size in terms of athletes and support team members, (4) who were successful in the international circuit winning medals within the last two Paralympic Games, and (5) with head coaches who have been present on their teams for at least five years. We reached out to eligible head coaches and scheduled a virtual meeting to explain the study. To protect anonymity, we will not share detailed lists of team/participant information, however we will note that in addition to three head coaches, data was collected from 10 support team members that included assistant coaches, high performance directors, strength and conditioning coaches, mental performance consultants, sport physiologists, and physiotherapists, as well as 19 athletes. In two of the teams, some of the integrated support team participants had dual roles, such as acting as the strength and conditioning coach and the mental performance consultant, and therefore spoke about their experiences with both roles during the interviews. Of note, all head coaches were male, and all athletes and support team participants included both men and women on the team. In total, there were six women and four men across the integrated support teams, as well as nine female and 10 male athletes. The athletes were diverse in classifications based on their sport type and disability, which cannot be disclosed to protect their identities, however we can say that athletes identified with having physical disabilities, including short stature and spinal cord injury, as well as neurological or neurodevelopmental disabilities, such as cerebral palsy. Additionally, athletes ranged in age from under 20 years old to over 40.

Each coach had experience as an able-bodied athlete prior to their parasport coaching careers. As leaders, they prioritized the physical and psychological well-being of their athletes and were interested in professionalizing their parasport to higher standards of excellence and continued success. One head coach had experience working with children with behavioural, neurodevelopmental, and learning disabilities, including cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and described himself as a continuous self-learner. A second coach had experience working in economics and finance and

described himself as competitive and driven to see his athletes succeed, while at the same time displaying a calm demeanor that was beneficial when managing interpersonal conflict or problem solving. Finally, a third coach considered himself a passionate and emotional person whose main strength was his ability to connect with his players on a relational level. He also felt his own experience with a learning disability influenced his desire to communicate clearly with his team. All head coaches were successful on the international circuit earning a combined 12 medals at both the Rio and Tokyo Paralympic Games, as well as coaching experience at the Parapan Am Games, World Championships, and the Commonwealth Games. At the time of the interviews, the coaches held their national head coaching position for an average of 15 years.

3.3. Data collection

The lead researcher spent approximately one week in person gathering data from each team. At that time, the researcher purposefully spent the first half of the week taking time to build rapport with the athletes, coaches, and staff by having informal conversations and silently observing the group dynamics of each team (i.e., interactions, conversations, training structure, vocal tone). In a similar way to community-based qualitative research (e.g., [Le Dantec & Fox, 2015](#)), *establishing presence* was a critical step in developing rapport, "speaking the same language" with regards to terminology or common sayings, and to identify unique areas for exploration during the interviews. Although each of the teams were bilingual, all participants who participated in the study had a good understanding of English and their language ability did not appear to influence the quality of data collected.

The primary methods of data collection were individual semi-structured interviews with the support team and head coaches ([Smith & Sparkes, 2016](#)), as well as two focus groups with athletes from each team (three to four athletes per session, total of six focus groups; [Krueger, 2014](#)). Separate interview guides were created for head coaches, members of the support team, and athletes to acquire unique aspects of the participant's perspectives and roles on the team.¹ Focus groups were chosen for the athletes to minimize feelings of intimidation, primarily for athletes speaking in their second language, and allow athletes to build off each other's common experiences and stories. At the beginning of our time with each team, we asked the head coach to identify members of the support team that were part of their daily training environment and/or considered to be influential in creating their team environment. All athletes and staff were provided an overview of the project on the first day of the lead researcher situating herself in each training environment and provided contact information for those interested in participating. In total, we collected three interviews with head coaches, 10 interviews with support team, and six focus groups with athletes. Key questions from the athlete focus groups included: What strategies or behaviours does your coach employ that you consider to be valuable or effective towards fostering success? Are there any strategies or behaviours that your coach does not use that you wish he did? Questions from the support team interviews included: In what ways (if any) do you work with the head coach in pursuit of creating and/or maintaining a strong team environment? Are there any unique facilitators or barriers that come to mind when trying to create a strong team environment in the parasport context compared to an able-bodied setting? Finally, key questions from the head coach interview were: What strategies or behaviours do you use in training or competition that you consider to be valuable or effective in fostering success on the field of play? What members of the support team do you consider particularly valuable towards creating and/or maintaining a strong team environment? If you could go back to day one with this

¹ The interview guides for the interviews and focus groups can be accessed by contacting the corresponding author.

team, is there anything you would do differently, and if so, why? Each team had 10 to 12 members of their team participate in either interviews or focus groups, and on average, the interviews were 58.10 min and the focus groups were 57.35 min. Data were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim yielding 292 single spaced pages of transcription.

3.4. Data analysis

All transcript data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016). Raw interview data were imported to the qualitative data software, Nvivo, in which initial codes were generated to describe participant experiences and then grouped into larger patterns and themes to represent commonalities across interviews/focus groups. For example, when discussing the coaches' curiosity and willingness to engage with various areas of high-performance, such as sport psychology, nutrition, or exercise physiology, an initial code was created as "Curiosity and Asking Questions". This code was then discussed among members of the research team who acted as critical friends by challenging, supporting, and questioning the lead researcher (Smith & McGannon, 2018), which led to the ideas of innovation as a core value, continuous learning, and engagement with the integrated support team in pursuit of excellence. In providing the integrated support team with ownership, autonomy, and a voice in the process, these collections of codes were organized into the higher order theme of "Managing the Support Team" that is now the second theme of our results. After multiple iterations of grouping themes, the research team felt confident with the final list of three themes to provide our representation of the data. Based on our philosophical assumptions, readers are invited to engage with the findings of the study with the understanding that this is *one* way to view the results and are encouraged to reflect on their own interpretations of the data using the direct quotes provided.

3.5. Trustworthiness

Our qualitative study was guided by a flexible list of characterizing traits that aided in trustworthiness and based on the unique context of our study (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Smith & McGannon, 2018). First, we set out to be *reflexive* in our work by keeping a detailed journal throughout the study, yielding seven pages of single-spaced notes that allowed the lead researcher to document her perceptions, feelings, and experiences within each parasport team. These notes included perceptions of the head coaches' behaviour when interacting with their athletes in practice: "Coach acting as a watchful eye without speaking excessively" and unique aspects of the training environments: "Athletes have handouts with individualized process goals for training". These notes aided in the development and refinement of the interview and focus group guides (e.g., upon learning about pre-competition meetings of behavioural expectations for one of the teams, a question in the interview was added to better understand this process), facilitated informal conversations amongst the participants and research team, and led to a deeper understanding of the material. In line with recommendations by Bentzen et al. (2021) and Liu et al. (2022), we strove for *width* and *coherence* in our study by collecting international data from three countries, multiple sports and genders, and a diverse array of individuals on each team, which allowed us to acquire an in-depth, meaningful picture of group environments in a collection of national parasport teams.

4. Results

Based on the data gathered from the head coaches, integrated support teams, and athletes, our reflexive thematic analysis yielded three overarching themes to portray coaching considerations towards managing national Paralympic team environments. To protect the anonymity of the participants, we will not connect direct quotes with

country locations or teams. We also deidentified the data by using pseudonyms and removing information about sport type, athlete backgrounds, and disability types.

4.1. Managing the athletes

The largest theme discussed from all of the participants (i.e., coaches, athletes, and support teams) was the ability for the head coach to manage their unique group of athletes with varying coaching considerations. All teams were made up of a diverse group of athletes, some who were young and single and others who were married with children, some who worked full-time jobs and others holding a scholarship at post-secondary education, some in a wheelchair with physical disabilities and others standing with neurological disabilities. Coaches described individualizing their coaching with the idea of "being fair, not equal":

If they are thinking that everybody should be treated in the same way, there will be a conflict. On the first day I told them I will not treat them the same; I will treat them according to what each person needs. If you're talking about it openly and you don't have favourites on the team, it *should* be different but still fair.

Coaches were cognizant of making decisions based on the personal circumstances of their athletes. For example, one head coach made special considerations for his athlete who was at greater risk of developing COVID-19 by training in a group due to his disability and allowed him to train closer to home. The coach explained how this athlete was married with children compared to many of his other athletes who were in younger and in school, and thus, considered his life within and outside of sport when making coaching decisions. In another team, coaches were aware of special considerations for younger athletes who may be living away from home for the first time or in need of a role model outside of sport. Athlete Hugh commented:

He told me that any time of the day, if you need something, pick up the phone. It doesn't have to be [sport] related. He made that very clear when I was moving to the city on my own. If something broke, pick up the phone and call. We'll figure it out. So that was very comforting knowing that, hey I'm moving 600 km away from home, nobody is really nearby. Having an adult role model made it a lot more comforting.

While the majority of athletes felt their coaches were supportive of their lives outside of sport, some expressed frustration when they felt their head coaches were not understanding of their individual situation and how it impacted their ability to train. Athlete Todd explained:

It's a challenge for all of us because we are supposed to live like professional athletes, but we aren't professional athletes. We don't get that much money to play, so for me, I have to work to be able to live, to buy food, to pay my rent. So on one end, coach wants us to practice 10 times a week and not work because you get tired from work, but on the other hand, you have to.

Assistant Coach Leon echoed how financial concerns intersected with life stages as some of the older players had families to provide for, and therefore, were not able to continue in sport unless they were at the top of the podium:

[Finances are] a big problem. It's why we have some players that need to choose what to do because they don't earn any money in parasport. For example, if they win gold at the Paralympics, there's no money. In Rio, they got little toys, a bunny, or something. Especially when they get older and start having a family, they have to choose. So that's the problem. If you're taking gold in Turkey, for example, they win around \$1,000,000. Also, in countries like China, the government will pay for their families, their education, their house, cars, and everything, so it's completely different. Now the

level is getting much stronger too. It's very difficult to take a medal if you don't practice full time.

Thus, being involved in parasport where, at times, there was less funding and potential to create a financially secure career posed a challenge for athletes that parasport coaches were required to address. Understanding the athlete and their unique or individual situation was the critical first step to effectively managing this relationship.

Specific to parasport, all teams identified disability as a factor that coaches needed to be aware of when coaching a group of high-performing parasport athletes. Assistant Coach Chris, a former parasport athlete himself, described the physicality differences on his team compared to able-bodied sport:

I think we need to be aware that we will encounter more diversity in the types of people [we have]. What I mean by that is in the Olympics, the different body types will pretty much look the same across the board. If some are different, they are the exception. Whereas, in parasport, there is not a given body type or disability that will assure you to win the gold medal.

From another team, head coach Matteo echoed:

In parasport, you need to take the disability into the context. Everything you plan, everything you do, must be according to what's good for that person, that disability. How much they should practice, how much rest they need. If you have a big group of different para players with different disabilities, it's much more individual planning and treatment. You have to be more creative as a para leader because you have to find solutions and there are not many who have done it before you.

Athletes also spoke about the need to individualize practices based on disability, indicating that managing practices with athletes of varying ability levels was a significant difference between coaching a team of Paralympic and Olympic athletes:

[Coaching a group of parasport athletes is] where the adaptability comes in. You go from, okay we have one practice where everyone is doing the same thing to: We have four different practices and within those practices two people are doing the same thing but at different times so it's like 8 or 10 different sets of expectations and goals going on at once (Athlete Jeemin).

Thus, coaches had to be knowledgeable of creating and managing a high-performance training session that considered and paid attention to varying needs. To do so, the lead researcher observed that two of the head coaches provided individual handouts to each athlete that outlined their training and process goals for their practice, and in the other team, spent the first 5 min of practice outlining each athletes' workouts. Due to this extensive preparation, the lead researcher saw how coaches were able to take a back seat during the session itself, silently observe, discuss with support team, and provide feedback to athletes when necessary. This allowed for a continuous flow of the session and for athletes to work towards their individualized goals despite variability in functionality. All coaches in our study were able to do this successfully, however athletes recounted times in previous sport clubs where their coaches were unable to manage various disabilities, leaving them excluded or isolated from the group:

I was at my club for a while but every year it would be a new coach and a new training style. Sometimes what the coach wanted wouldn't work for you. Often in practice, I'd have to cut things down but then I would just end up sitting at the wall for five minutes waiting for them to finish. A lot of times it just didn't work (Athlete Daphne).

As such, coaches were successful in part due to the extensive preparation they executed working behind the scenes and preparing individual sessions to support athletes during training.

4.2. Managing the Support Team

Each team had a set group of integrated support members that aided in areas of sport development, such as physical training, mental performance, high performance management, nutrition, physiotherapy, sport physiology, and medical professionals, yet each team was also unique in which members of the support staff were involved in the daily training environment. For example, one team had the head coach, assistant coach, physiotherapist, and sport physiologist working with athletes multiple times a week whereas their mental performance consultant and nutritionist came in once a month. Alternatively, another team had the head coach, assistant coaches, mental performance consultant, and strength and conditioning coach within the daily training environment, and had medical professionals and physiotherapists come in when needed. When it came to the selection of support team members, coaches were deliberate (when possible) about who they wanted to join their teams and searched for intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities beyond certifications or qualifications alone, such as social skills, passion, and engagement. For example, coaches in all teams spoke about members of the support team who went above and beyond their role to be engaged within the teams. Coach Jordan explained:

When [our former physiologist] left, I had learned so much that I didn't think I needed another physiologist. But she said no, you'll probably want someone around to crunch numbers for you. I said okay, I'll hire this guy. He was in two hours a week or something like that but he came in wanting to be amazing and wanting to contribute. All of a sudden, he was incredibly valuable. He wasn't just there to crunch numbers; he was there to be part of this team. That's one of the advantages we have. We have people who are genuinely interested in what they're doing, they want to be here, and they want to help.

It was evident from the lead researcher's observations and conversations with the athletes that their relationships with the integrated support team were also strong:

Researcher: How do you get along with your integrated support team?

Athlete Hugh: Fantastic.

Athlete Siobhan: I don't think there's many bad things people say about our support team. I think that's one of the best things about our team, if not the most consensus that we have on our team, that our support staff is great.

Athlete Daniela: It's because they're part of the team, they're not just the support team.

One issue raised from one of the focus groups was that athletes desired to be part of the decision-making process when support team members were to be removed from the team. For example, athletes from one team highlighted how they felt blindsided when they received an email about a member of the support team, whom they trusted and developed a strong relationship with, was let go:

Athlete Jeff: One thing I would say for the mental [performance consultant] is that they fired her without consulting us and that was a shock because, especially during COVID, I know the team really used her and developed a bond. It was easy to talk to her and then ...

Athlete Julia: They sent us an email about it and then we were like what? Just the way that they did it. It took us such a long time to build up trust.

However, these same athletes also deliberated on the context of high-performance sport and how the coaches might not always be the ones making the decisions about their support team; instead, being in the hands of high-performance managers or sport organization stakeholders.

In all teams, participants spoke about the coaching styles used to

manage their support teams, including the use of autonomy-supportive behaviours. For instance, the ability for coaches to “let go” of control was critical in allowing the integrated support team to help implement their coaches’ vision and values to foster a strong team environment:

I think it’s important that there’s not just one coach holding on to everything. So when he or she disappears, there’s no culture left. The attitudes, the values, everything has to be integrated down in the system. It has to be rooted (Strength and Conditioning Coach Chrissy).

In each of the teams, the integrated support team positively emphasized their coaches’ ability to foster an autonomy-supportive environment for their staff to provide their opinions and feel a sense of ownership in their work. For example, Assistant Coach Gabriel mentioned “I think [the coaches’] biggest strength is that he is open for us to work together with him, come with our opinions, and not be the total chief. Of course, he is the boss, but in a good way.” Other members of the integrated support team in various teams reiterated this point:

He never decides what everyone is going to do. Whether it’s with me, with other coaches, everyone, he’s good at making everybody feel ownership in what we are doing. He’s there all the time but I think everyone working within the team feel that they can make a difference with what they’re doing (Assistant Coach Lara).

One of the things really surprised me coming in from the [a different sport] world was that he was really open to changes or suggestions. I came in with my background and sometimes would say “hey [coach], should we do this? What do you think of this?” And he would say “yeah, you’re the expert, I trust you.” Early on he had a lot of trust from all the members of the integrated support team. Whenever I had new ideas, new ways to monitor, he was really open minded (Physiologist Marc).

This openness and trust to their support team allowed for an autonomous environment that was constantly growing and evolving. In one of the teams, a core value was innovation. In another team, curiosity. Thus, teams were constantly striving and seeking knowledge on how to improve their performance. Mental Performance Consultant Ambre described her coaches’ sense of curiosity to seek knowledge by incorporating members of the support team to strive for excellence in saying:

He’s all about trying to understand what he can do and how he can create a team in order to achieve excellence. He is curious and seeks knowledge, which is great because I think in that way, he can reach the athletes better in terms of their needs. He’s curious within nutrition, physical exercise, sports psychology, all different subjects of experts we have.

Thus, coaches were successful when they were curious and knowledgeable of innovative training methods that were largely spearheaded from their team of experts. In fostering autonomy towards their team, they were able to function as a cohesive team of experts to provide high-quality training to their athletes with diverse needs and ability levels.

4.3. Managing the team as a collective unit

The final theme brought up by all teams was the importance of the head coach in managing the Paralympic team environment consisting of all participants, including coaches, athletes, and support team members. Each team discussed a set of core values that their athletes, coaches, and integrated support team decided on and strove to live by in their training and competitive environment to foster a sense of unity. As Coach Liam described, his team was “more like a family” where individuals felt supported and comfortable with one another yet were pursuing individual and collective goals at the high-performance level, such as the World Championships or Paralympic Games. The coaches played a large

role in fostering a team environment through behavioural expectations and norms, and when successful, the athletes benefited from feeling valued and supported. For instance, Athlete Katherine described having a late event during her first year on the team and felt valued when her teammates stayed to cheer her on: “The coaches told us that we leave together. All the team stayed and cheered for me and that really meant a lot especially because I was totally new”.

Contrastingly, interpersonal conflict ensued when there were strong personalities on the teams that were more individualistic in their orientation towards the group. For instance, Mental Performance Consultant Ambre explained her experience on the team and how athletes with strong personalities influenced the team dynamic:

There are a few really strong personalities within the group, which is fine. You need the divas, you need the leaders of the pack, but sometimes those personalities can become too strong and overshadow the other personalities who aren’t that strong, but still have a lot of knowledge and experiences to share.

Additionally, head coach Liam described a former player who was incredibly talented, yet perceived as challenging and difficult to work with:

We had one player who was a big star and recently ended her career. She was a really strong personality but she was the best in the world. Of course they are special. To get there, they think of themselves a lot. She wasn’t rude or anything, but that’s her personality. She believes that things should be done for her. It will be easier when she isn’t here ... but ... we will not win as many medals [laughter].

In another example, athletes from one team felt their head coach was not living the values set by the team, which in turn, created tension and resistance from athletes when they were told what to do. For instance, the coaches’ use of social media caused issues for female athletes who felt uncomfortable with pictures posted without their approval or permission. These athletes felt this was in opposition to the team value of “Respect” that they were all expected to follow. Athlete Emilia stated the consequence on an individual and team level: “I don’t focus on values because he doesn’t follow them. So how can the group follow it?”

All teams spoke about the inevitability for interpersonal conflict to arise when managing a high-performance team environment and described varying approaches that coaches used to maintain cohesiveness. For instance, coaches utilized their integrated support team to help resolve interpersonal disputes or team conflict. Some coaches utilized their assistant coaches to manage coach-athlete relationships that were better suited for each other. As Athlete Kristina stated, “I don’t have him as a coach because we don’t match each other. We know it doesn’t work so we don’t do it anymore”. From another team, Coach Matteo said: “I have outsourced this athlete to my assistant coach so she has been taking care of her”. In another example, coaches recognized situations where they would benefit from including their mental performance consultants as objective third parties to help resolve coach-athlete disputes:

[The mental performance consultants] gave us a bunch of different ways to look at what was going to happen and how we could get the best out of each other. That was eye opening. We had a great relationship literally from that meeting on (Coach Jordan).

Thus, coaches identified when their team of experts were better equipped to intervene in a situation and utilized their strengths for the betterment of team satisfaction and performance.

Coaches also utilized their integrated support team when resolving conflict among team members. In one example, Assistant Coach Gabriel discussed a time when his athletes felt underappreciated or unsupported by other teammates at competitions. The coaches brought this issue to the entire group, including athletes, coaches, and the support team, and had the players explain their viewpoints and why their actions were detrimental to their well-being. “That’s very tough to hear for a team that has been together for 10 years”. He further explained that these

meetings could quickly become chaotic with heightened emotions in the room, however when controlled and contained by the coaches and the support team, this chaos could lead to conflicts being resolved and relationships better understood:

Chaos is sometimes good. It can be these meetings when they are open to each other because it can create chaos when someone tells you that you are shit. It is very tough to hear that from somebody, or your friends, and they can be angry with each other for two weeks, two months, but in the end something good comes out of it.

As such, the coaches demonstrated trust in their support team to help manage teammate conflicts and interpersonal issues within the team. Taken together, coaches were responsible for managing their athletes, integrated support team members, and the team as a collective unit to produce a well-functioning team environment for their athletes and staff to thrive on a personal and professional level.

5. Discussion

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of coaches, athletes, and integrated support teams towards the management of three national Paralympic teams. Based on our findings, we learned that coaches were responsible for managing diverse athletes with varying personal and situational considerations and were deliberate about utilizing their team of experts to enhance team functioning and performance through a collective set of core values. Our discussion will focus on three elements of our study: (1) the coach's awareness of their athlete's personal and professional well-being, (2) managing diverse and challenging relationships, and (3) utilizing and managing integrated support teams.

5.1. Coach awareness of athlete well-being

All members of the teams outlined the coaches' responsibility to be aware of their athletes' lives outside of sport, including whether they required a full or part-time job, held educational scholarships, or relied on performance-based sponsorships for funding. When examining resources at the high-performance level for countries with successful summer Paralympic sport programs, Patatas et al. (2020) found that funding for Paralympic athletes was comparable to Olympic athletes, yet differences arose with regards to sponsorships for athletes in parasport. As noted by our participants, personal demands (e.g., costs associated with starting a family) in conjunction with higher costs to participate in parasport due to equipment or staffing specializations often leave parasport athletes with no choice but to engage in dual careers (cf. Condello et al., 2019) while training and competing. This provides a particularly challenging environment for national parasport coaches, especially considering that ineffectively managing dual careers has been associated with athlete burnout in both school/work and sport (Sorkkila et al., 2017). This tension of holism versus performance was noted from the athlete perspective in which coaches were not always recognizing the conflicting (yet financially necessary) demands outside of sport, leaving athletes feeling frustrated and misunderstood. Coaches have the potential to either enhance or detract from their players well-being (Davis & Jowett, 2014), and in the case of high-performance parasport environments where athletes are already juggling multiple demands including potential co-morbidities of disability, such as fatigue or pain (Yorkston et al., 2010), this detrimental influence of the coach may be more impactful to mental health and well-being in a Paralympic setting. This is in line with a study that monitored mental distress of Paralympic athletes before, during, and after the 2022 Beijing Paralympic Games (Bentzen et al., 2022). The results indicated that the athletes experienced high levels of mental distress during the Games. The coaches found that monitoring athletes' mental health was a valuable tool to increase their awareness regarding mental distress, initiate support for the athletes, and improve their own coaching. As recommended by

Kegelaers et al. (2023), *in press*, there is a need to focus on the perspectives of parasport populations when considering dual careers and mental health. Future research in this area will allow us to better understand how head coaches can effectively support their Paralympic athletes in managing dual careers and work to enhance athlete well-being in an otherwise highly pressurized, performance-based setting.

5.2. Managing diverse and challenging relationships

Across all teams, conflict was an inevitable factor for coaches to manage. Participants identified values-based strategies (e.g., fostering autonomy, promoting ownership, having difficult conversations as a team, modelling appropriate behaviours) to resolve these challenges and maintain group cohesion. This finding relates to previous coaching research from Heelis et al. (2020) where coaches emphasized the importance of modelling appropriate behaviours and developing trust and respect with athletes to manage the relationship. Acquiring trust and respect is a critical element to the closeness component of the 3+1Cs model (Jowett & Poczwadowski, 2007) and influential in developing high quality coach-athlete relationships. Alternatively, low levels of trust and respect have been associated with interpersonal conflict within the coach-athlete relationship, feelings of rejection, distress, dissatisfaction, and at times, relationship termination (Alexander et al., 2020; Wachsmuth et al., 2017; Wachsmuth et al., 2020). Literature on coaching athletes who are perceived as difficult has predominantly focused on the coaches' perspective, and although valuable, limits the dyadic understanding of interpersonal conflict and overlooks the athlete's perspective on negative coaching behaviours – an area that has recently garnered attention in parasport coaching research (e.g., Alexander et al., 2022; Allan et al., 2020; Pomerleau-Fontaine et al., 2023). Our study extends previous parasport coaching research by acquiring the coach-athlete dyad perspective of team conflict, as well as a third lens from the integrated support team. This triadic perspective illustrated different perspectives on how coaches utilized their support team to resolve interpersonal conflict (e.g., assistant coaches working with athletes who challenged the coach, using mental performance consultants to help manage conflict). Although the findings were in line with research from Wachsmuth and Jowett (2020), our results are among the first to be explored within the parasport context. Future researchers are encouraged to dive deeper into exploring conflict within national Paralympic teams to expand our understanding of how coaches, athletes, and support teams can develop trusting and respectful relationships that lead to team cohesiveness and ultimately success and well-being for all parties involved.

5.3. Managing and utilizing a team of experts

Our findings demonstrated that national team coaches were deliberate in utilizing their team of experts to help carry out their vision and values for the team as well as aid in maintaining a cohesive training environment. This finding is consistent with previous research on high performance and serial winning coaches who emphasized the importance of developing and implementing a strong coaching philosophy, vision, and values, and subsequently selecting support teams who aligned with these principles (Allen & Muir, 2020; Mallett & Lara Bercial, 2016; Meckbach et al., 2023; Urquhart et al., 2020). In high-performance sport, the support teams play a critical role in facilitating the coaches' vision of team success (e.g., Allen & Muir, 2020; Armstrong et al., 2022), however, their perspectives and interactions with head coaches are largely left out of the research narrative. Recently, the coaches' role in managing support teams has been explored in a case study on the Swedish FIFA World Cup soccer team in which coaches were deliberate about choosing staff that aligned with their values and vision (Meckbach et al., 2023). While the importance of support teams regarding athlete development (Lefebvre et al., 2021) and

team cohesion (Falcão et al., 2015) in the parasport setting have been noted, our study was the first to provide a voice to a large number of national support team members to understand the head coaches' role in fostering a team environment. This perspective provided us with an in-depth understanding of the interconnectedness between the vision of the head coach (e.g., creating a team environment that is competitive yet feels like family) and the actions put forward by the staff to make this vision a reality (e.g., reinforcing the values in the daily training environment). This concept relates to the co-orientation concept of the 3+1Cs model outlining the degree of interdependence within the relationship, which in turn, influences the levels of closeness, commitment, and complementarity present within the relationships. Considering the integral role of the support team members on facilitating a high-functioning team environment, future researchers are encouraged to expand upon what is known about co-orientation (along with the other C's) in the coach-support team relationships as it has been largely overlooked in the parasport context to date.

5.4. Limitations and future directions

Despite the strengths of this study, there are limitations to address. First, due to the active nature of their sporting careers, it is possible that coaches, athletes, and support teams may have been hesitant in answering questions surrounding coaching behaviours they considered detrimental to the team environment in fear of their responses being identified. Second, despite our concerted efforts in recruiting participants who were comfortable speaking English, future researchers could have a translator who speaks the native language present to provide participants the opportunity to speak in their first language when conversing. Third, we chose to recruit co-acting, mixed-gendered, summer Paralympic sports for our study. It would be interesting to extend this study to obtain additional perspectives, such as single-gendered sports, reverse integration sports, teams with female head coaches, head coaches identifying with disabilities, team sports, or winter Paralympic sports. Finally, we were unable to make geographic comparisons or conduct cross-cultural analyses on the participant experiences to maintain confidentiality, however future researchers are encouraged to further our global understanding of parasport coaching.

6. Conclusions

Overall, this study identified coaching considerations towards managing national parasport teams by gathering data from multiple perspectives (three head coaches, 10 support team members, and 19 athletes) across three teams. Findings are applicable to the parasport community, including coaches, athletes, support team members, and coaching organizations, who are interested in better understanding parasport-specific coaching strategies and behaviours (e.g., understanding considerations when planning a practice with athletes of varying ability levels and training loads, understanding how to best utilize their integrated support teams to foster cohesion and relationships within the team). By conducting this research, we were able to provide a voice to two underrepresented perspectives in parasport coaching research - the athletes and support teams - and believe researchers should continue collaborating with parasport team environments to progress what is known in the parasport context. This study is among the first to recruit national parasport teams from three countries around the world and can act as a platform for researchers to identify cross-cultural comparisons and differences among diverse organizational contexts. It is our hope that these findings can contribute to improving the knowledge and skillset of parasport coaches and, ultimately, the satisfaction and well-being of parasport athletes around the world.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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