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Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Johansson, S., Kenttä, G., Andersen, M. (2016)
Desires and taboos: Sexual relationships between coaches and athletes.
International journal of sports science & coaching, 11(4)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1747954116654777>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:gih:diva-4461>

Desires and Taboos: Sexual Relationships between Coaches and Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Coach-athlete sexual relationships (CASR) constitute ethical, behavioral, social, and emotional quandaries that are rarely addressed openly. Most of the current body of research in this area focuses on coaches' sexual harassment and abuse of children and female athletes. In the present article we discuss legal CASR and adopt a coach perspective. As dual relationships, CASR blur the boundaries between professional roles circumscribed (usually) by ethical codes of conduct and private spheres of love and desire. We explore the problems associated with the limitations of dichotomous right/wrong ethical decision making and discuss additional ways to understand these relationships, accounting for coaches' and athletes' well-being, performance, gendered sexual agency, power, ethical dilemmas, sport policy, and legal implications. Our discussion raises questions about how to open up dialogue and transparency regarding CASR and how to facilitate functional, healthy coach-athlete relationships. Finally, we provide implications for future research that include legal and consensual CASR and advocate transparency, open discussion, and coach education about CASR dilemmas.

Keywords: Coach-athlete Sexual Relationship, Love, Sexual Abuse, Power and Agency, Gender, Ethics, Coaching, Policy

INTRODUCTION

Intimate desires, love, and sexuality are part of most people's basic needs for well-being, social connectedness, and interpersonal happiness. Intimacy, attraction, sexual relations, and love occur in almost all social settings – including sports. Nevertheless, some sexual relationships that occur within legal boundaries are still highly sensitive, taboo, and uncomfortable to talk about, especially sexual activities that contravene social conventions and are regarded as unethical, suspect, or harmful [1]. Sexual relationships between coaches and athletes can be such an example, and they tend to be complex, complicated, and problematic because professional and private spheres intersect and role boundaries become blurred. Such relationships are intimately related to power dynamics and often result in ethical dilemmas [2-5]. CASR have been suggested to harm athletes' well-being, jeopardize athletic careers and performance ability, disrupt team and peer dynamics, undermine gender equality in sport, and increase the risk of coaches sexually abusing athletes [4-9]. We believe these circumstances and suggestions illustrate CASR as pressing issues, but also that regarding CASR as inherently and inevitably harmful and abusive may contribute to stigmatizing and keeping such relationships closeted, leaving the athletes and coaches feeling isolated, anxious, and hypervigilant, all of which may be damaging for the well-being of the parties involved. Throwing compassionate (and dispassionate) light on these relationships may go some way to help move the discussion beyond simple moral prohibitions for complex and all-too-human phenomena and into the realm of reasoned debate.

Sexual relationships between coaches and athletes can come in various forms of dating, romance, reciprocal or unrequited love, solid partner relationships, marriage, and more or less loose sexual relations that are temporary, one-off, sporadic, or regular over time [2, 10-12]. Some CASR may be kept closeted or be known within a limited circle of acquaintances in and outside sports, whereas some are open and public [2, 10-12]. In the present article these relationships will be labeled as coach-athlete sexual relationships (CASR) unless referring to a specific form. Also, in this article, we distinguish CASR from sexual harassment and abuse (SHA), which broadly relates to any form of sexual exploitation, harassment, abuse, and violence that can occur in both legally sanctioned relationships (e.g., marital rape) and non-consenting relationships [13].

CASR are phenomena that are seemingly most common between female athletes and male coaches. A simple explanation is that there are more male than female coaches [14-15], and that heterosexual relationships represent numerical majority. In addition, gay and lesbian

relationships are likely to be more closeted than straight ones given sports as favoring heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, and heteronormativity [7, 16-18].

The purpose of this article is primarily to critically discuss sexual relationships between male coaches and female athletes that occur within legal boundaries in competitive sports with an emphasis on taking the perspectives of coaches. By highlighting coaches' viewpoints we intend to add another dimension to the dominant current literature, which primarily focuses on the SHA of athletes. Our intention is to facilitate a critical discussion beyond good or bad, right or wrong ethical judgments and explore some additional ways to understand CASR, accounting for the health, well-being, need-satisfaction, and performance of coaches and athletes, as well as ethical dilemmas, gendered sexual agency, sport policy, and legal implications. Through this approach, we hope to initiate a more holistic discussion of issues that often have been dismissed or blanketed with global condemnation under the rubric of *abuse*. Our goal is to go well beyond demonization and to humanize the controversies involved, but we have no intention to favor coaches over athletes, pose a conflict between athletes' and coaches' interests and well-being, refute coaches' influences on athletes, or diminish or excuse any form of SHA. We do, however, suggest that our critical discussion and a coach perspective can add some important previously disregarded questions, topics, and viewpoints to augment and help balance the current literature. To begin, we have created an illustrative fictional scenario of a coach and his female athlete who are involved in an intimate and sexual liaison.

A FICTIONAL CASE EXAMPLE

Here is a fictional case example that serves to illustrate and problematize *some* of the multidimensional complexities and dilemmas that may come into play in scenarios of coach-athlete interpersonal and sexual interactions. For the purpose of this article, we exclusively focus on the perspective of the coach in this case, without making judgments about who or what is right or wrong in this scenario.

First, as an exercise, we ask you, while reading this fictional case, to compassionately put yourselves in the mind of a young and successful male coach. This scenario unfolds in a small city at a highly regarded sport club with a good reputation. Historically, the club has been successful in this sport. The club has a highly competitive training group with six boys and four girls, aged 16-19, who have trained together with their coach for almost five years. Club coach Tom is single and 26 years old. In addition, he is also the national coach for the

juniors who will compete at the world championships later this year. Sarah and Lisa are the shining stars of the club with big hopes and expectations. Both are 19 years old and in competition with each other for a spot in the national junior team. They also tend to compete for the coach's attention. Lately, Tom has felt a growing attraction to Lisa and her well-sculpted athletic body, her outgoing personality, and her mature and sharp intellect. In addition, Lisa often seeks personal attention from Tom and seems flirtatious in ways that he interprets as she fancies him too, but neither one has made any attempts to act on their feelings of attraction. Tom considers any action on his desires to be taboo because Lisa is seven years younger and, most important, he is her coach, and, for him, it just instinctively feels wrong to blur their professional and private boundaries.

Tom and Lisa often spend more than 20 hours together each week during training, travelling, and competitions, so they share a strong and close connection. One evening at a training camp in Spain, Tom is alone in his hotel room, and Lisa knocks on his door. She is crying and is upset because her results in training have been worse than usual, especially in comparison to Sarah's. Tom invites Lisa into the room and tries to calmly console her. A comforting hug begins and then lingers. Tom becomes uncomfortable and hesitant, but Lisa holds on and pulls him tighter. The physical closeness is something that Tom has longed for in secret, and he can't help but lose himself in the moment. The embrace begins to feel more erotic, and Tom wonders if his desire is shared by Lisa. He kisses her softly on the mouth, and she hesitantly responds. Then everything seems to happen quickly and intensely.

When Lisa leaves the room after a few hours to get some much-needed sleep, the sexual intimacy between Tom and Lisa is now a fact. Tom immediately begins to feel anxious and extremely uncomfortable with what has just happened. Worrisome thoughts begin to overwhelm him, and countless questions rapidly fill his mind. What has he done?! This can only end badly, right? Will others find out what happened? How will they react? Is Lisa going to talk about it? Should he tell someone about what happened? Is this even legal? What will parents and others say? Does he have to quit coaching now? Has he harmed Lisa in any way? Is she in love with him? How could he be so stupid and short sighted? He has always been careful to keep a balance between care and professional distance with his athletes, despite his strong attraction to Lisa. How will he now manage the endless competition between Sarah and Lisa? And the important qualifying event is tomorrow! Has she done this as a selfish act to become selected to the national team? Will others notice anything strange? Tom's thoughts are spinning at full tilt with feelings of fear and regret growing stronger and stronger. How could this be since it felt so beautiful just a moment ago?

Until this day Tom felt confident in himself and his coaching, but from this moment he feels increasingly lost and cannot reconcile his behavior with his professional coaching role in the murky landscape of erotic desires and transgressing professional taboos.

Now, we ask you to please experiment and go back and re-read the same case taking the athlete's perspective to add another important dimension to the same scenario. You can also change the age, gender, or sexual orientation of the coach and athlete in the case, or add mutual or non-mutual feelings of love and affection perceived by the coach and athlete to reframe the same story in various sociological, emotional, normative, and power contexts and dimensions. Finally, please consider this situation in a context where there is no official policy or guidelines that regulates codes of conduct regarding CASR, and compare that with a context where CASR are strictly prohibited.

The contextual situation, intersecting both structural and individual factors, is fundamental for the understanding of CASR. The purpose with the fictional narrative is to illustrate examples of the interwoven factors and subjective dimensions that may be at play within a CASR case. By altering just a few important factors, the interpretation may change, for example, from perceiving a sexual encounter to be consensual to it becoming a case of sexual abuse. Although we might wish for simple, unequivocal solutions to categorize and accordingly manage CASR, we believe that premature negative generalizations of complex and contextually dependent phenomena might unintentionally cause harm to coaches and athletes. We will continue to problematize the fictional scenario a few times later on in the article. Next, we present a brief review on some of the related literature relevant to CASR.

BRIEF REVIEW

Overall, CASR are an under-researched topic. Most of what is known about CASR draws on research into SHA in sport. Fueled by public scandals of coaches sexually abusing young athletes, research on SHA in sport that has grown steadily during the last 20 years [cf. 19]. The current literature into SHA focuses on the incidence and prevalence of SHA. In turn, this research plays an important role in a growing activism against SHA in sport, including national and international initiatives to develop policy, prevent SHA from occurring, and safeguard sport more broadly [19-20]. It is today a research-based fact that SHA occurs in sports [e.g., 19-21]. In addition, two SHA surveys have included questions on the incidence of CASR. Toftegaard-Støckel [22] reported that 28% of Danish athletes surveyed had had an intimate relationship with a coach, and Kirby et al. [4] found that 22% of Canadian athletes in their study reported to have had sexual relations with authority figures in sport (including

coaches). Studying CASR from a SHA perspective has proven to be valid and important to investigate some specific aspects of these abusive relationships. Such a limited scope is, however, arguably inadequate to include and represent the whole picture of CASR.

In the sport psychology literature, some authors have addressed a variety of aspects of coach-athlete relationships [e.g., 11, 23-24]. These studies have included interpersonal components such as: interdependence, mutual trust, concern, support, cooperation, closeness, shared knowledge and understanding, and the relationship's potential to be beneficial for coaches' and athletes' well-being, interdependency, satisfaction, and performance achievements. In a small-scale interview study with coach-athlete married couples, Jowett and Meek [11], reported specific components such as love, caring, and genuine concern, which were perceived as positive for well-being and athletic performance.

The sport psychology literature also raises issues of erotic desire and taboo regarding sport psychologist-athlete romantic attraction [e.g., 25-27]. Coaches and sport psychologists, as professional authorities with responsibilities for athlete well-being and sport performance, may share some similarities in relationships to athletes. If sport psychologists are licensed psychologists then practitioner-athlete sexual relationships are broadly prohibited and strictly regulated by legal authority to protect the welfare of the clients. A licensed sport psychologist is obligated to adhere to ethical standards, applicable laws, and psychology board regulations in the process of making decisions regarding their professional behavior [28]. Most practitioners providing sport psychology services in North America and Europe, however, are not licensed psychologists and are not bound by such strict codes of conduct. For an in-depth discussion of erotic attraction in sport psychology service delivery, see Stevens and Andersen [27].

Outside of sport sciences, authority-subordinate romantic and sexual relationships within workplace and educational settings have been studied. This research has typically adopted a broader analytical and theoretical framework than the literature addressing CASR, and has reported both positive and negative characteristics and outcomes of such romances and sexual relationships [e.g., 29-32]. Powell and Foley [33] suggested that sexual relationships related to taboos and negative reactions, that contravene organizational policy, social conventions, and involve asymmetric power between the parties, are more likely to be kept a secret. Powell and Foley stipulated further that organizational policy stating that authority-subordinate sexual relationships are improper and prohibited may have the potential to heighten negative reactions, conflicts, and disruptive group dynamics.

To conclude, important initiatives have been made to increase knowledge and raise awareness about SHA and to implement policies, codes of ethics, and child protection measures to protect vulnerable people. Less attention has been paid to broadly defined CASR including the experiences of coaches and athletes in legally occurring CASR. Next we briefly address legal regulations and sport policy before moving on to informal factors regarding critical characteristics of CASR, power, and gendered sexual agency.

LAWS, CODES OF CONDUCT, AND SPORT POLICY

In this article we focus primarily on legal CASR (i.e., relationships involving parties of legal age who have consented to sexual activities). According to laws in most countries for adults 18 years and over, sexual activities with a person under a certain age, usually between 13 and 18, is a criminal offence because minors are regarded as incapable of giving informed and meaningful consent. Countries such as Denmark and the United Kingdom have raised the threshold to the legal age of 18 in relationships where consent might be compromised because the minor party is in a position of dependence on adult guardians or professional parties, such as teachers and coaches. Importantly though, legal boundaries do not necessarily mirror subjective boundaries and experiences. Kirby et al. [4] emphasized that it can be difficult for athletes to fully understand the legal labeling in terms of defining their own experiences of SHA based on criteria of law, and thus they often avoid making official complaints. Consequently, “legal CASR” is a line relatively easy to draw within the confines of an article or policy, but may be a highly complex matter in practice.

Overall, it is relatively unusual for sport associations to have policies governing CASR, and in many countries ethical guidelines and codes conduct for coaches do not exist [3, 21]. A growing number of sport associations in some countries, however, have adopted policies, guidelines, and codes of conduct that basically advise against or prohibit coaches and athletes from engaging in sexual relationships, regardless of age and informed consent [cf. 34-37]. This approach is thus far most prevalent in the UK, Canada, Australia, and the USA, but it is also a position adopted by the IOC [20] and the ICCE [38]. For example, The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) has a template for its National Member Protection Policy that states explicitly:

. . . consensual sexual relationships between coaches or officials and the adult athletes they coach should be avoided as they can have harmful effects on the athlete involved, on other athletes and coaches and on the sport’s public image. These

relationships can also be perceived to be exploitative due to the differences in authority, power, maturity, status, influence and dependence between the coach and the athlete. If a sexual relationship exists between an athlete and a coach, we will consider whether disciplinary action is necessary. Factors that will be taken into account include the relative age and maturity of the athlete to the coach, the financial or emotional dependence of the athlete on the coach and the likelihood of the relationship having an adverse impact on the athlete and/or other athletes. If we determine that the sexual relationship is inappropriate, action may be taken to stop the coaching relationship with the athlete. This could include a transfer, a request for resignation or dismissal from coaching duties. If an athlete attempts to initiate an intimate sexual relationship with a coach, it is the coach's responsibility to discourage the approach and to explain why such a relationship is not appropriate. [39, p. 8]

To the ASC's credit, they do not have a blanket prohibition of CASRs, but rather, they have a reasoned approach and leave open the possibility that such relationships may not be damaging. Despite these developments, there is still no evidence that prohibition reduces the occurrence of CASR, diminishes motivation among coaches and athletes to engage in such intimacies, or lowers the prevalence of SHA. In conclusion, two main approaches to legal CASR within sport policy and practice have been identified: either relative silence or (sometimes qualified) prohibition.

RELATIONSHIPS AND COMPLEX GREY AREAS

Coach-athlete relationships commonly involve a number of critical characteristics that may pose complications and ethical dilemmas. The primary reason why these characteristics may be defined as critical is because they are rarely unequivocally right/positive or wrong/negative, but they can be one or the other depending on the context. Critical characteristics that are commonly addressed in the literature include: athlete dependency and trust in the coach, close personal contact between coach and athlete, age differences, frequent physical contact, structural gender order, and coaches' power, authority, and influence over athletes [8-9, 21, 40-42]. Coach-athlete relationships are also complex because they sometimes overlap professional and private spheres, where coaches may fulfill multiple roles beyond an entirely sport-related leadership one [4, 9, 42]. Taken together, these characteristics constitute a complex, ambiguous grey area, where interpersonal, physical,

intimate, and sexual interactions are likely to carry multiple subjective meanings and outcomes.

Some SHA scholars have investigated coaches' and athletes' perceptions of critical characteristics relating to intimate and sexual coach-athlete interactions, grooming, and SHA to try to identify appropriate and inappropriate behaviors [2, 8-10, 43-45]. These studies, however, basically demonstrate that it is nearly impossible to identify clear-cut boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behavior unless it concerns clearly illegal issues (e.g., involving children under the legal age of consent). The reason for this is that perceptions of boundaries are primarily based on subjectivity, context, individual perceptions, and preferences. For the same reason, diverse and sometimes conflicting perceptions, approaches, experiences, and opinions can be noted among and between coaches, athletes, and researchers. For example, in Toftegaard-Nielsen [8] a majority of the surveyed coaches perceived sexual intimacies as something perfectly acceptable given that the athletes are at least 18 years old. Some of the coaches even expressed lax attitudes towards legal regulations governing sexual intimacies with athletes. In Bringer et al. [2], some coaches said that sexual relationships are private affairs or a question of civil liberties between (presumably consenting) adults. At the same time, the coaches in these two studies broadly condemned SHA, but they also expressed uncertainty, disagreement, and ambivalence rather than clear-cut boundaries for ethical and professional conduct around CASR [2, 8].

In addition to diverse perceptions among coaches and athletes, SHA scholars in turn may perceive and interpret experiences differently than the involved coaches and athletes. For example, in Toftegaard-Støckel [22] a majority of coach-athlete intimate relationships were reported as positive by the athletes and occurred when they were at least 18 years old. Nonetheless, Toftegaard-Støckel suggested that: "Coaches should be informed that there is no such thing as a romantic coach-athlete relationship, and that coaches' physical or emotional advances are always wrong" [22, p. 98]. In Volkwein et al. [9] a majority of athletes reported non-instructional and potentially sexually connotative behaviors by coaches as positive, whereas the same behaviors were defined as potentially threatening by the researchers. Arguably, what generally defines right/positive and wrong/negative behavior regarding legal CASR might be difficult to determine, and is, perhaps, not the most important question to try to answer.

Besides critical coach-athlete relationship characteristics, unclear boundaries, and diverse perceptions of CASR, additional complexity is added by factors such as sexual desire, attraction, and love. The impelling, overpowering emotions and forces of love are often so

strong they may sideline social rules and individual principles [46]. As a related example, a coach who lived together, and later married, one of his players on his women's soccer team stated in an interview: "I know it cost me job opportunities, but when you fall in love, everything else is meaningless. If I'd had to make pizzas forever in my family's restaurant, I would have done it" [12, p. 64]. Meanwhile, in the SHA research the meaning and impact of love and sexual desire tends to be broadly downplayed, ignored or reduced to a grooming strategy [cf. 3, 34, 47]. Nonetheless, there are cases where admiration, infatuation, and love can facilitate sexual abuse, for instance by appearing to be consensual and wanted at one point (notably at young age), but at a later point (notably at an older age) be redefined as unwelcome and abusive [47-48]. Johansson, however, emphasized that a CASR, especially between consenting adults, may not, in itself, be harmful or abusive; love and desire may arise in many complicated and unexpected ways. As she stated, "The characteristics of the coach-athlete relationship do not simply constitute a premise for grooming and sexual abuse, they also facilitate attraction, love and sexual intimacy" [3, p. 690]. Similarly, we suggest that the complex qualities of CASR require a holistic, balanced approach and not one where CASR and SHA are contextualized as inherently synonymous or distinctly orthogonal phenomena. At the same time we stress the necessity to cautiously consider a variety of negative and positive associations, experiences, and reactions of CASR and awareness that it may be controversial, sensitive, or offensive to mix issues such as love and SHA. We want to emphasize, moreover that love does not equate to a functional relationship, nor does it offer protection from harm or SHA.

As we stated, CASR tend to occur within a complex ambiguous grey area, comprising contextual circumstances and characteristics that carry multiple, often subjective, meanings and outcomes. We have tried to illustrate some of the complexities and dilemmas of CASR, and have posed questions that may arise as illustrated by the fictional case example. Would the scenario be more acceptable if Tom's and Lisa's intimate and sexual liaison was an authentic response to mutual affection and love, which developed into a committed relationship? Would it be more acceptable for the subordinate person (e.g., Lisa, in this case) to exploit the person with power (e.g., Tom) rather than the other way around? In some ways Lisa now has a lot of power over Tom and could ruin his career. What happens when power balances reverse? What might be some of the consequences of Tom's and Lisa's story getting out for Tom, Lisa, other coaches, administrators, team members, and team climate? We believe that regardless of the answers to such questions, both Tom and Lisa could benefit from having someone to consult with about the situation, for example, a licensed sport

psychologist or by involving a counselor, social worker, or other professional. This tactic could facilitate talking about the situation, managing some of the worries and questions, getting help and guidance focusing on how to maintain a functional relationship between each other and, in turn, keeping the social environment of the club healthy.

POWER AND GENDERED SEXUAL AGENCY: MALE COACH PERPETRATOR – FEMALE ATHLETE VICTIM

Within SHA research suggestions have been made that some coaches develop a perpetrator mentality targeting athletes [2], that coach-athlete relationships may be similar to master-slave relationships [49], and that men's SHA of women broadly relates to systematic male violence and societal patriarchal structures [7, 42, 50-51]. *Coaches-as-perpetrators* refers primarily to male coaches, which moreover relates to a male perpetrator-female victim paradigm adopted in much SHA research [52]. For example, Kirby et al. [4] suggested that athletes, regardless of age, can *never* truly consent to sexual activities with a coach. In the case of a female adult athlete initiating a sexual relationship, even when the outcome is a long-term relationship resulting in marriage, Kirby et al. still did not recognize this scenario as an exercise of her power, sexual agency, and desire; she is still considered a victim of the male coach abusing his power.

Macro level approaches and theories of power-ridden, stereotyped authority figures as potential perpetrators of SHA in relational connection to a subordinate, victimized party are not limited to CASR or to the sport context. Rather, this approach is quite common across different research fields and disciplines, and the response to condemn and prohibit such relationships is alternately supported and criticized in the literature on authority-subordinate sexual relationships [e.g., 31-33, 53-54]. In essence, the literature illustrates a disagreement about the appropriateness of authority-subordinate sexual relationships not only within sports but also in other domains. We suggest that by using a larger variety of conceptual lenses, the predominant understandings, contextualizations, and theories about CASR and gender have the opportunity to be critically discussed and enriched, albeit without diminishing the importance of recognizing and eradicating the sources of abusive relationships.

Sikes [1, 31] has studied consensual male teacher-female student sexual relationships. On the basis of teachers' and students' own stories being told in a positive fashion, Sikes critically contrasted and re-interpreted the predominately negative perspectives held by outsiders: reducing such relationships to harmful and abusive scandals, casting teachers as predators in line with a discourse reproducing normative notions of sexuality. Sikes

countered what she called “the simplistic model of teachers’ ‘sovereign power’” [1, p. 146] and the male/teacher/predator – female/pupil/victim dichotomy [cf. 52], with the aim “to queer this taken-for-granted assumption and offer an alternative view of gendered sexual agency and the exercise of power that does not cast women as the passive recipients of active male desires and the inevitably weaker and harassed party in any relationship” [31, p. 267]. Sikes discussed issues that are often never considered in the moral panic surrounding teacher-student sexual relationships, which we suggest also tends to be the case regarding CASR. As another example, Sikes suggested that: “The dynamics of such [teacher-student] relationships may well be rooted in the power differential, but it would probably be wrong to assume that, within the relationship itself, the balance is always in favor of the male” [31, p. 277]. Drawing on Sikes perspective, it may be plausible that the suggestions Kirby et al. [4] made regarding adult female athletes’ inability to consent to CASR objectify the subordinate individual, and portray women and female sexuality as passive. On that note, Dank and Fulda [53] criticized the paradox that the subjectivity of the subordinate individual (assumed to be female) is what distinguishes SHA, but when women define a sexual relationship as consensual they are regarded as incapable of making such a distinction. Furthermore, Johansson [3] illustrated this paradox by raising the question, “If no means no, does yes mean yes?”

Sikes stressed that when child protection panic spirals out of control all adults are seen as potential abusers, which can pose a serious threat to innocent teachers because over time “the pendulum appears to have swung from not believing children to not believing teachers” [1, p. 149]. It is thus necessary to begin to provide a body of evidence and increase awareness of teachers’ vulnerable positions to see to the safety of both children and teachers, according to Sikes [1]. Similar concerns have been raised regarding athlete and child protection within sports. According to recent studies [55-60], the attention to SHA in sport has resulted in growing fears about harmful physical touch and male coaches sexually abusing young athletes. This research suggests that the development of prohibitive policies within sports can be located within a *risk-society* context [cf. 61] where danger, mistrust, and moral panic necessitate the protection of young athletes and the control of coaching practices through extended surveillance, regulation, and codes of conduct [55-60]. For example, implementation of athlete protection that advises against bodily contact [e.g., 36] has resulted in cases where coaches (particularly males) avoid both physical touch and spending time alone with their athletes [55, 57-58, 62]. It has also been reported that coaches feel increasingly worried of unintentionally causing discomfort or harm to young athletes

(particularly girls) and then being falsely accused of SHA [44, 62]. Consequently, these conditions might hinder trusting relationships developing between coaches and athletes, decrease coach engagement, compromise future coach recruiting, and ultimately have negative effects on coach-athlete interactions and social environments in sport [58, 60]. At the same time, we find it to be a plausible concern that athletes may not feel empowered enough to speak up and express their sense of private boundaries, but rather, in silence, give in to powerful coaches. Hassall et al. [44] also suggested that coaches tend to be reluctant to intervene in how other coaches' coach and act and in the relationships they form with their athletes, which we suggest may hamper transparency and amplify athlete vulnerability and isolation.

In conclusion, we suggest it is necessary to go beyond the discourse of male/adult coach perpetrator – female/child athlete victim dichotomy based on theories of structural gender order, sovereign power, and female desire. This approach does not contradict that CASR can be abusive, harmful, and certainly problematic in many, perhaps even most, situations. Nor does it imply adopting a dualistic approach separating CASR and SHA as distinct phenomena. Rather, we wish to highlight a few additional aspects regarding power, gender, and sexual agency (without any claims of being all-inclusive) that may be at play in some CASR.

With the above considerations in mind, we once again return to discuss the fictional case example from the introduction. Is it the case that Tom, either in this particular instance or by definition, was sexually abusing Lisa? What responsibilities are plausible to attribute to the coach and the athlete in this particular scenario, including the possibility that Tom and Lisa are genuinely attracted to each other? How does the age factor come into play here given that both parties are above age 18? But abuse may occur regardless of age, and a certain duty of care needs to be considered in any relationship. Should relationships involving mutual love be suppressed, prevented, or prohibited? How and to what extent may coaches' power and professional responsibilities extend into the private sphere? What if Tom is sexually inexperienced, a virgin feeling unconfident in the situation, and Lisa is the more dominant party acting out her sexual desire? Or how about if the scenario involved lesbian or gay parties, or if Lisa was Tom's coach instead? Would such circumstances somehow change the power dynamics into a scenario of interdependency, equality, and mutual consent? We do not claim to have any definitive answers to these numerous questions concerning the fictional scenario with Tom and Lisa. Considering the importance of subjective dimensions, such as the context, individual perceptions, and preferences [cf. 2-3, 8, 44], we believe that these

types of complex situations and dilemmas need to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis with the overall intention to reduce harmful, emotionally abusive, and dysfunctional sexual (and non-sexual) coach-athlete relationships. This approach requires an environment that promotes transparency and welcomes open dialog within sports, which we suggest is hampered if coaches are categorized as potential perpetrators of SHA.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

The purpose of this article was to critically discuss sexual relationships between male coaches and female athletes that occur within legal boundaries in competitive sports with an emphasis on the perspectives of coaches. We acknowledge that CASR relate to several ethical, social, and professional dilemmas, and can be problematic, harmful, and abusive. Of course, SHA and all types of harmful relationships within sport need to be prevented. The current SHA research has prompted much needed athlete protection and offers important insights into how CASR and SHA can intersect and overlap. We suggest, however, that it is also necessary to understand CASR within broader contexts of meaning, including coaches' perspectives and potential differences between CASR and SHA. Thus, there is a need for further studies on both coaches and athletes experiences, including effects on well-being and sport performance, of legal CASR that are defined as consensual and mutually desired. We want to emphasize that any ethical solution is rarely straightforward or unequivocally right when considering legal and mutually desired CASR. Rather, it is a matter of optimal and suboptimal ways to deal with complex, sensitive situations and ethical dilemmas on a case-by-case basis.

We want to emphasize that it is important not to shy away from taboos and emotional and ethically sensitive issues, but rather to address such topics more frequently than have been done in the past. To date, a narrow and limited research focus around SHA and child protection in sport, and related worries and moral panic, have potentially hampered an open discussion about dealing with desires and taboos around CASR. We hope that the present article can contribute to such a discussion, and we welcome critical conversations within the research context to further current knowledge, understanding, and theories. We also advocate a climate of open dialogue and discussion in sports to counter predominant taboos and to build awareness of healthy and non-healthy coach-athlete relationships. This type of transparency may in turn enhance opportunities to guide coaches and athletes towards healthy, functional relationships, facilitate whistle-blowing, and to help prevent athletes feeling isolated in stigmatized relationships. We also want to emphasize the importance of

encouraging and promoting interdependent coach-athlete relationships and athlete autonomy to challenge coaches' exercise of power to dominate and control athletes [63-64].

Our attempt was to adopt a coach perspective on CASR without reducing awareness of the power differential that is structurally attributed to the coach-athlete relationship. We have provided some implications for further research by discussing additional dimensions of structural power, male/coach/perpetrator – female/athlete/victim stereotypes, gendered sexual agency, and related normative conceptions by drawing on literature into authority-subordinate relationships outside the sport context. In addition, Sikes [31] argued that scholars have a responsibility to acknowledge sexual minorities and challenge traditional normative shibboleths, informal rules, and societal pressures towards normalization of “deviants” such as girl, lesbian, gay, and transsexual students and teachers expressing their sexualities and sexual identities, instead of reproducing social conventions. Although such issues lie beyond the scope of this article, CASR involving sexual minorities also require further research and debate.

Other implications for further research that we suggest include intervention programs and critical examinations of various strategies implemented to govern CASR, such as prohibitive policies and codes of conduct. We suggest that there might be a risk that prohibition contributes to stigmatization, shame and thus secrecy which heightens the vulnerability of both coaches and athletes (similar to what has been noted in workplace settings [33]). Secrecy may also protect perpetrators, enabling them to isolate and imprison athletes in abusive relationships. Moreover, we stress the importance of considering age factors for groups and subgroups of athletes in addition to the current focus on child athletes and child protection. In regard to adult athletes, whose careers sometimes continue into their late 30s and beyond, additional coach-athlete relationship issues emerge and components such as family, pregnancy, long-term couple relationships, and marriage traditionally become more salient and probable than in younger groups. Policies and codes of conduct that prohibit CASR may be helpful and protective when regarding child-adult relationships, but this is not necessarily the case when considering adults well above 18 years old. We want to emphasize, however, that the overall ignorance and neglect to openly address the phenomena of CASR within sports constitute an urgent call for expanded knowledge and action. It is only possible to advance scientifically sound knowledge and understanding when data become available.

Overall, we suggest that issues of attraction, love, and mutual desire need to be included in a comprehensive context of sport policy, practice, and research. Importantly though, this approach needs to include an awareness of the risk of sexual and emotional

abuse that might be facilitated by (unshared) love, affection, and dependency. We also suggest that CASR are not always and entirely harmful and abusive (similar to other authority-subordinate sexual relationships). Consequently, we propose that policy and practice focusing on preventing and reducing harm inflicted by CASR is a more viable pursuit than to set out to eliminate or legislate against all CASR. Another reason to examine consensual CASR is that there may be additional outcomes and circumstances that do not concern SHA, but may pose other types of dilemmas and consequences for coaches and athletes. We want to emphasize though that CASR need to be managed without sidelining coaches' and athletes' capabilities to define their relationships or hinder the involved parties voicing their emotions, intentions, and perceptions.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on our discussion on how to facilitate functional, healthy and sustainable coach-athlete relationships, we make three brief, concluding suggestions: (1) Promote research that explore all facets, include the full range of positive and negative characteristics and consequences of legal CASR defined as consenting and mutually desired by involved parties. (2) Enhance and increase transparency, a climate of open discussion, and include explicitly learning objectives about CASR and related ethical dilemmas in formal coach education. Such coach education can, for example, include critical and reflective discussions about the type of ethical dilemmas and scenarios illustrated in the fictional case provided in this article. (3) Develop and carefully implement scientifically and ethically sound codes of practice and routines to address, consult, prevent, and reduce harmful, dysfunctional CASR, and SHA of athletes, albeit without broadly casting coaches as potential sexual predators.

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