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The Hidden Struggles of Elite Coaching: How Coaches (Don't) Balance Athlete Welfare with the Pressure to Perform

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ABSTRACT

We examined how coaches navigate the challenges of high-performance sport while ensuring athlete welfare. Using an ethnographic approach spanning 18 months at a high-performance gymnastics center, data from coaches ($n = 6$), parents ($n = 7$), and athletes ($n = 12$) were collected through both participant and non-participant observations ($n = 30$), semi-structured interviews ($n = 22$), post-session analyses with coaches ($n = 5$), and document reviews. Analysis revealed the struggle coaches experienced balancing athlete welfare with the pressure to perform. Specifically, five key themes were developed: (a) managing athletes' expectations, (b) maintaining transparency with all stakeholders, (c) acting in alignment with values, (d) personal coping mechanisms in a highly scrutinized environment, and (e) managing other coaches' egos. Findings indicate that coaches endure tremendous internal and external pressure to reconcile and balance athlete welfare with the demands of high-performance coaching, which took a significant physical and mental toll. Surprisingly, the most concerning issues for coaches were relationships with other coaches and being told they were "too nice" to make it as an elite coach. Findings demonstrate an urgent need for sporting organizations and coach education programs to provide more systematic and comprehensive support for coaches. This would help retain them in the profession and provide ongoing support and development for those who continue to endure the many challenges of the profession.

KEYWORDS

Winning; mental health; stress; dilemmas; ethical

In the last decade, there has been increased attention to coach-athlete abuse and harmful coaching behaviors, leading to plans by National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to reform coaching in their sports (Lyle, 2019). Recent examples of unethical coaching in several high-profile sports have included Swiss Gymnastics (Rudin Cantieni Rechtsanwälte AG, 2021), United States National Women's Soccer League (King & Spalding, 2022), and United States Olympic Fencing (Peter, 2025). In gymnastics in particular, two prominent reports, one in the United Kingdom (Whyte, 2022) and the other in the United States of America (McPhee & Dowden, 2018, the Ropes & Gray Report), each document the extent of the malpractice by coaches and identify prevalent cultures of physical, sexual, and mental abuse.

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In the USA, the outcome was a period of introspection in U.S. Gymnastics with significant economic, legal, and structural consequences. In the U.K., the Whyte Review and media attention spotlighted gymnastics and the behavior of coaches in the sport. The response by British Gymnastics led to the publication of Reform '25 (British Gymnastics, 2022), with action to be taken in four areas: culture, welfare, learning and development, and performance. This included an intention by the Governing Body to "increase its direct contact with registered clubs to promote and monitor compliance with the information set out in the Gymnastics Handbook" (British Gymnastics, 2022, p. 22). Alongside media and other stakeholder scrutiny, this has the potential to develop in coaches a sense of anxiety about their practice and their club culture more generally (Schyvinck et al., 2024). The Whyte Review (Whyte, 2022) highlighted the absence of good practice in elite-level and performance development pathways. Therefore, we examined how high-performance gymnastics coaches navigate the tension between striving for the best possible outcomes for their athletes and ensuring that the fundamental good-practice tenets of the coach-athlete relationship are preserved (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016).

The nature of high-performance coaching

For both coach and athlete, the domain of high-performance sport is characterized as goal-driven, outcome-based, and rife with performance indicators (Lyle & Cushion, 2017; Quick & Baghurst, 2025). Markers of performance are frequently linked to measurable indicators such as finish times, distances, podium positions, final placings, and personal bests (Hughes & Bartlett, 2002); in other words, winning is paramount, which places enormous stress and pressure on coaches (Baghurst, 2025; Griffin et al., 2025).

In many cases, the achievement of these performances is coupled with an underlying additional pressure of financial investment from governments, national governing bodies (NGBs), sponsors, and others invested in the success of the coach/athlete (Morley et al., 2017). This funding is essential for athletes, coaches, and NGBs to continue to compete at an appropriate level. However, these pressures can place stress on how coaches and athletes interact with one another (Olusoga & Thelwell, 2016), as the performances of the athlete often dictate the tenure and (perceived) success of the coach (Griffin et al., 2025).

In the context of high-performance gymnastics coaching, coaches balance the welfare of their athletes, for whom they assume responsibility, against the need to ensure optimum athletic performance (Mallett & Rynne, 2015). These responsibilities consist of legal, moral, and "best practice" features of the coaching process (Lyle, 2019). Clearly, there are aspects of coaches' practice that are simply wrong, such as the emotional and physical abuse documented in the Ropes and Gray Report (McPhee & Dowden, 2018) in American gymnastics. However, sound coaching practice may be tested when, in pursuit of an effective coaching process, it is perceived that coaches require a high level of lifestyle commitment and calculatedly place stress upon athletes to prepare them for competition (Mallett & Rynne, 2015). For example, national championship-winning American football coach Urban Meyer permitted his strength and conditioning coaches to add additional challenges to their athletes' regular workouts (Gavazzi, 2015). The goal was to prepare athletes for the stress and frustration experienced in competition by inducing it in a more controlled environment during practice.

The high-performance domain, with its intensity of engagement, results-based scrutiny, ethical dilemmas, the specter of performance-enhancing drug use, fine margins between winning and losing, and the "zero-sum game" of competition, creates a climate within which coaches are required to balance performance outcomes against increasingly scrutinized athlete welfare practices (Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2024). This suggests a complex web of expectations about coaches' practice, involving fellow coaches, athletes, and other stakeholders (e.g., parents, club officials). The question becomes, how does a coach effectively balance pushing their athletes for athletic success against the dangers of harming their well-being, whether physical, mental, or something else?

Coach-athlete relationships and the associated stressors

A coach's relationship with their athlete is vital to success and is well-featured in the academic literature (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016; Slade et al., 2025). Jowett (2017) stated that "the effectiveness and success of coaching reside within the coach and the athlete and the unit relationship they develop" (p. 154). Although the coach-athlete relationship should (preferably) be harmonious, this does not always happen, and external factors can affect it (Gosai et al., 2021). Coaches do not work in a social vacuum, and there are many others (e.g., coaches, owners, agents, and fans) who impose on a coaching context, holding goals other than those of the coach and athlete (e.g., win now, self-promotion, sales) (Baghurst & Parish, 2022; Henriksen et al., 2025; Quick et al., 2025). Recently, Slade et al. (2025) conceptualized "The Grey Zone Model" (p. 274) to explore how the coach-athlete dyad was stressed. They reported that coaches frequently experienced challenging conditions and implemented various strategies to help them mitigate such stresses (e.g., building trust with athletes).

Therefore, while coaches may seek to "preserve" the positive aspects of the coach-athlete relationship as much as possible, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, for coaches to achieve this in the context of changing expectations, policy changes, personal resources, and the vagaries of the coaching process (Lyle & Cushion, 2017; Quick et al., 2025). Indeed, limited research examines the challenges coaches face in maintaining a positive and meaningful coach-athlete relationship. Therefore, this study explored how coaches attempt to preserve, or choose not to preserve, these relationships and to gain a deeper understanding of how they navigate this complex and dynamic aspect of their role.

Theoretical framework

This research draws upon Relational Coaching Theory (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) to examine the interpersonal dynamics among coaches in a high-performance gymnastics setting. At the heart of this theory is the importance of the quality of the coach-athlete relationship, in which partnership and dialogue are crucial (Jowett, 2025), and the contribution of the athlete's voice is emphasized (Jowett et al., 2023). Although commonly applied to coach-athlete relationships, the principles of this relational theory are an equally appropriate vehicle for understanding the nuanced interactions between coaches operating within the same organizational context.

Relational Coaching Theory is centered on the "3Cs + 1 model" (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016, p. 471), which identifies four components of effective interpersonal relationships:

Closeness reflects the emotional bonds characterized by mutual trust, respect, and appreciation; *Commitment* denotes the intention to maintain a long-term relationship (i.e., temporal), emphasizing dedication and loyalty; *Complementarity* refers to cooperative interactions and the degree of reciprocal behavior between individuals. These interactions are described as "responsive, receptive, comfortable, and friendly" (Davis et al., 2022, p. 2424). *Co-orientation* represents the +1 in the model, epitomizing a shared understanding and agreement on goals, roles, and the nature of the relationship. Co-orientation is particularly important in coaching, given the varied domains, roles, and motivations that characterize sport.

Applying this model to coach-coach relationships is a suitable means to explore *how* these dimensions manifest among peers, particularly in environments where collaboration is essential, yet often challenged by competition, differing coaching philosophies, and organizational pressures (Thelwell et al., 2008). In high-performance gymnastics centers, coaches frequently navigate complex social landscapes, especially with athletes with whom they spend many hours per week (Côté & Salmela, 1996), but also with other coaches, parents, national squad coaches, club officials, and budding high-performance gymnasts (Nicholls et al., 2016; Thelwell et al., 2016). The coaches' welfare, performance success, working relationships, and effective center management will likely be shaped by and dependent upon the closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation that characterize the coaches' relationships (Jowett, 2025). To explore this tentative "hypothesis," the Relational Coaching Theory offers an approach to understand the dynamic relational intricacies within high-performance sport.

Purpose statement and research questions

Our primary purpose was to explore how coaches in high-performance gymnastics navigate the complex realities of their role, particularly the challenge of balancing athlete welfare with the demands of intense training and competition. This was accomplished by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: How do coaches navigate the tension between safeguarding athlete welfare and meeting the performance demands of high-pressure training environments in high-performance sport?

RQ2: What strategies, actions, and reflections do coaches employ to support athletes in achieving their goals in high-performance gymnastics?

RQ3: What environmental features and agents exist that stress and shape the coach-athlete relationship?

Method

A social constructivist epistemology underpinned this research: the view that knowledge is constructed through social interaction rather than discovered as objective truth (Hyde, 2020). In addition, this work adopts a realist ontology, which holds that reality exists independently of what is seen, heard, or known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Participants and setting

The study was conducted at a high-performance gymnastics center, intentionally chosen for its longstanding success in British gymnastics, including the development of several Olympic medalists over the last 20 years. Gymnastics was chosen due to the sport's recently increased scrutiny (Whyte, 2022), which was anticipated to influence coaches' perceptions of oversight, sensitivity, and athlete relationships.

Participants included a range of stakeholders: high-performance coaches ($n = 6$), parents ($n = 7$), and athletes ($n = 12$). Four of the six coaches held the Level 5 Gymnastics Coaching Qualification, the highest available in the U.K.: two held Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, respectively. Coaches' ages ranged from 23 to 46 years ($M = 38.2$ years, $SD = 9.67$ years).

Gymnasts ($n = 6$ female, $n = 6$ male) were all part of the center's high-performance pathway. Ages ranged from 8 to 22 years ($M = 12.8$ years, $SD = 5.35$ years).

Weekly training hours varied depending on their level (*Range* = 15–30 hours). One gymnast was an Olympic medalist, while others competed nationally and internationally.

Parents of the gymnasts had been involved with the club through their children's participation. They routinely observed training from the club's viewing balcony four to six times weekly.

Instruments

The lead researcher recorded all semi-structured interviews using a Dictaphone, which were transcribed verbatim. Semi-structured interview frameworks were devised for the coaches' background interviews. Following the initial background interviews, questions were formulated as a response to what the researcher saw and noted. Researcher field notes documented key coaching moments observed on the gymnasium floor. In addition, the research team met and discussed observed points of interest. Coaching sessions were video recorded, and selected coaches wore wireless microphones to capture audio.

Procedures

University ethics committee approval was obtained for the research design and procedures. The lead researcher had a prior relationship with the club manager, facilitating access to the research setting. An initial meeting was held with the club manager to explain the study's aims. Approximately one month later, the lead researcher delivered a formal presentation to the coaches outlining the scope and intent of the research project. Following this, the club manager and the lead researcher sent a formal e-mail to all parents, outlining the research objectives and what participation would involve.

Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, including coaches, parents, club managers, associated staff, and gymnasts over the age of 18. For gymnasts under 18, both parental consent and child assent were obtained. All consent and assent documents were completed on-site at the research location. Over 40 days (150 hours) were spent at the research site. During these visits, parents, coaches, and gymnasts were spoken with in various formal and informal interviews/meetings. What follows below is an overview of the research data collection strategy.

Months 1–4: familiarization phase

This phase involved background interviews with all coaches, the club manager, and the club welfare officer. These interviews, lasting between 60 and 120 minutes, were designed to provide context about the club's culture and stakeholders' perspectives on both the club and the wider sport of gymnastics. Coaches discussed their coaching philosophies and the challenges they faced. The lead researcher also attended weekly coaching sessions ($n = 20$; 4:30 – 8:30 pm) to observe and interact with coaches and gymnasts when appropriate. Most of these were video recorded ($n = 20$) from a high vantage point on the gym floor. Three coaches agreed to wear wireless microphones during 12 sessions, enabling a closer analysis of coach-athlete interactions. Informal conversations with parents observing sessions also took place. This phase allowed stakeholders to become accustomed to the researcher's presence around the club and during training sessions.

Months 5–10: immersion interviews, generation of theories

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all six coaches, 12 athletes, and seven parents during this period. Coach interviews focused on how they motivated athletes and what external factors (e.g., policies, stakeholder influences) impacted their coaching processes. This phase coincided with the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics, which brought additional pressures for some coaches, and was an aspect explored during interviews (*Range* = 20–120 minutes). Athlete interviews (≈20 minutes) were conducted on the gym floor. Parent interviews occurred in the club café (*Range* = 30 - 60 minutes).

Months 11–15: theory testing and collaboration

Follow-up interviews ($n \approx 30$ minutes) were conducted with four of the coaches alongside a series of informal drop-ins. This allowed for a focus to be placed on "testing" theories by asking coaches more explicit questions. Additionally, six collaborative meetings were held with two coaches with management responsibilities to discuss ongoing developments and better understand the political dynamics within the club. These coaches were selected due to their active engagement in the research process and had expressed a desire to generate new knowledge (or sense-making) through dialogue. These meetings focused on shared sense-making and interpreting emergent events.

Months 16–18: wrap-up and dissemination

The final phase included wrap-up interviews with all coaches ($n \approx 20$ minutes), concluding the data collection process. In addition, two meetings were conducted on-site with club management to present the findings of the research ($n \approx 40$ minutes).

Data analysis

Over 18 months, a significant quantity of data was collected in various formats (i.e., video-recorded participant and non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, drop-ins, and document reviews). Consequently, data were analyzed iteratively throughout the data collection phase (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Quick et al., 2025). For example, emergent issues arising from interviews were discussed among the research team along with points of interest or "coaching moments" that arose within sessions. This process was intentional, as

emergent findings were used to inform follow-up questions and guide coaching observations. The research questions, theoretical framework, and inter-researcher conversations helped formulate and revise working theories throughout the data collection phase. What follows is an example of developed theory:

> From the background interviews, there was consensus among all coaches that the athletes they worked with were talented, yet it was extremely unlikely they would become Olympians. In speaking with the coaches, they were clear about where their athletes stood regarding performance charting, gymnastics grades, and personal development plans. It was initially assumed (by the lead researcher) that the coaches would have shared this knowledge with the athletes and their parents. However, this was not the case, as coaches felt it was too politically sensitive to provide all this information at the outset. What emerged instead was a series of carefully crafted communications and interactions between coaches, gymnasts, and parents. In essence, it was akin to a continual and discreet management of "micro-expectations," which coaches attempted to navigate by providing objective measurements (e.g., grading criteria and video footage) at times they perceived the messages would be more positively received (e.g., not close to or during the buildup to competitions). For coaches, the process of maintaining transparency was therefore viewed as a dynamic and inherently complex effort.

Results

Five themes emerged and have been further developed from the data: (a) managing athletes' expectations, (b) maintaining transparency with all stakeholders, (c) acting in alignment with values, (d) personal coping mechanisms in a highly scrutinized environment, and (e) managing other coaches. To preserve participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used to present the data, and minor grammatical adjustments were made to improve the readability of quotes.

Theme 1: managing athletes' expectations

Managing athletes' expectations was an ongoing and often emotionally sensitive process for both parents and coaches. Coaches described a range of strategies used to balance athlete welfare, long-term athlete development, and the immediate pressures of competition, while simultaneously navigating the interpersonal dynamics that emerge when expectations are misaligned or tested. These moments often involved subtle negotiations of power, care, and trust, not as abstract concepts, but as lived, relational acts. One coach recalled a situation involving a gymnast returning to "part routines" after a major competition, despite her reluctance. The coach explained:

> I just said, "Look, you completed this routine just last week. We don't come out of school to not do this level of gymnastics – these are the expectations if you're going to train during school hours." She looked at me and said, "But I don't want to do it." And I said, "That's fine – if you don't want to do it, then we don't train during school time . . . " (Coach Andrew)

In this example, the attempt to reinforce clear boundaries, while acknowledging the athlete's emotional and physical fatigue, suggests the coach's broader concern was about sustaining the standards necessary for national-level competition. However, it is reasonable to assume that the coach was also aware of the "cost" of the training (i.e., missed schoolwork, lack of time with friends, and potential negative impact on academic grades). The data showed that

coaches must function as educators and "relational anchors," who can uphold performance expectations while maintaining a connection with their athletes.

Emotional openness was another strategy used to manage and reframe expectations. Coaches recognized that external pressures, often invisible in daily training, could profoundly affect how athletes responded. These external pressures (e.g., emanating from competition results, training performances, pressure to keep places on squads) were abundant. However, the two most prominent were other coaches (in and away from the gym) and parents watching from the balcony. Illustrating this point, one coach described a moment of concern for a gymnast after repeated falls during a session:

> I showed [Josie] a bruise on my arm and said, "This is from you falling off the bars three or four times today ... Please, is there too much pressure? Are you feeling pressure from your coaches?" She said, "No, no pressure from the coaches." "Okay, is there pressure from anywhere else?" And at that moment, I saw her mum start to edge forward a little on her seat up on the balcony. I gently turned Josie away from her mum, got down on my knees to be at her eye level, trying to shield her and make it just about the two of us, a safe space for her to open up. (Coach Andrew)

This social exchange illustrates coaches' emotional labor when trying to "read between the lines." The creation of a "safe space" was not incidental; it was intentional, designed to foster disclosure and reassurance. While the coach initially framed the conversation around physical safety, the deeper issue became one of psychological safety, particularly in the presence of parental scrutiny.

Expectation management also included knowing when to slow down or intervene for the athlete's long-term well-being. One coach described a moment of stepping back from physical intensity, despite the athlete's own drive:

> I can't keep pushing you when you're sore. It's not healthy ... Do you want to reach a point where you can't walk when you're older? I've had days where I've pushed myself so hard that I ended up with a stress fracture at 13 years old. I can't go through that again – not as a coach. (Coach Jasmine)

In this instance, expectation management is reframed not as a "restriction" but as an act of care and responsibility. The coach's use of personal history, resulting from their biography, adds a moral dimension to the conversation, the lesson being that sustained performance cannot come at the cost of long-term health. However, even well-meaning attempts to manage expectations can meet resistance. In one account, a coach described spending nearly an hour waiting for a gymnast to start training on a piece of apparatus. Despite this, the coach's absence of coercion reflected a patient, relational approach, even when mutual frustration was evident.

Finally, expectation management was often "future-oriented," especially when preparing younger athletes for unfamiliar environments. One coach spoke about a gymnast attending her first national squad:

> It's going to be a massive eye-opener for her. We have to make sure we've had those conversations before she goes, not just to explain what's expected of her as a gymnast at squad, but also to be there to support her, because she's bound to struggle. (Coach Andrew)

The emphasis here was not simply on preparing the athlete in a technical sense, but socially and emotionally (i.e., a holistic approach). Managing expectations meant preemptively

building trust and developing lines of communication (with both athlete and parent) about the challenges ahead.

In summary, managing athletes' expectations was shown to be far from a one-size-fits-all process. It required coaches to navigate factors such as physical limitations, parental involvement, and developmental readiness. Moreover, the findings illustrate the deeply relational nature of coaching, where emotional insight and interpersonal tact were just as critical as technical knowledge. For all coaches, practice was far from being an exercise in control. The management of expectations in this context was an act of "relational stewardship."

Theme 2: maintaining transparency with all stakeholders

Throughout the research, coaches attempted to maintain transparency, particularly with parents and athletes. However, this required the coaches to carefully consider *when* and *how* to provide feedback and identify opportune moments to share with athletes and parents. Coaches, gymnasts, and parents shared how communication practices had historically been poor, often leaving parents and gymnasts feeling in the dark over decisions about training loads, progression pathways, and athlete well-being. For example, one coach remarked:

> It's been a closed shop . . . girls have left the sport, and the parents have gone, "Well, what was that for? Why did we do it?" I never actually understood the process, or didn't understand where they were at. It's brought on more communication from the parents. But I think that's a good thing. (Coach Veronica)

From a different perspective on the same topic, a parent (Carla) remarked: "We pay a lot of money for the coaching . . . so you expect to sort of get some feedback and things like that. We don't get great feedback at the moment."

These comments from two different perspectives draw attention to the legacy of non-consultative decision-making, in which stakeholders were expected to comply without question. This form of "silent compliance" is now being challenged by a broader call for transparency (British Gymnastics, 2022). While this has led to increased scrutiny and more frequent expressions of dissatisfaction from parents, many coaches viewed this shift positively, seeing it as a necessary move toward earlier intervention and mutual understanding:

> There's a higher frequency of issues, . . . not on the same level, but more often. That said, we can nip things in the bud a lot quicker now. Whereas before, nothing was said, and then there was a big fallout . . . sudden suspensions or investigations that felt like they came out of nowhere. (Coach Jasmine)

However, maintaining transparency can lead to other issues. Coaches recounted instances where open communication led to conflict and confrontation, including emotionally charged and even hostile interactions with parents. One notable example involved a parent who screamed profanities in front of gymnasts after disagreeing with a progress report:

> The parent's meeting ended in her screaming at the two coaches and Marina [another coach], and then she marched straight onto the gym floor that I was covering, opened the door, screamed my name at the top of her voice, shouted, "f**k you," ripped the report up, and marched out. This is in front of a group of, like, eight kids. I very calmly walked over to the girls

> and said, "Girls, I'm going. Sorry. You shouldn't have to deal with that … behavior from a parent." (Coach Andrew)

This example illustrates the constant balancing act coaches face in navigating transparency and the associated problems this approach can cause. At times, decisions about athlete competition levels were met with resistance and skepticism from parents who struggled to reconcile visible markers of progress (such as skill acquisition) with unseen, foundational work. A coach recalled a recent conversation that they had with a parent about their child's progress:

> We've had at least three conversations of "Why is she not doing that yet?" and "She needs to be doing this for her competition." And I'm sitting there going, "Do you trust us? Because where she is right now is perfect, and we're doing these bits and pieces for a reason. I'm also having that same conversation with your daughter, and she says she understands." I keep reassuring her [athlete] we're doing the right thing. The fact that she's able to communicate openly with her coaches these days is a massive tick in the box. (Coach Andrew)

This extract reflects the coach's frustration with parents not trusting the coaching process. In this instance, the tool of communication is not only used to inform but also to build and nurture trust between the coach, the athlete, and her parents. The coach emphasizes open dialogue to align expectations and reinforce the athlete's development plan. Moreover, the athlete's ability to engage in open conversations with their coach signals a growing maturity and mutual respect within the coach-athlete relationship, which is an essential marker of progress beyond technical skills.

Although communication tools were not always fully implemented in the present study, they reinforced the coaches' commitment to transparency. They revealed a clear direction from coaches about how and when to communicate expectations effectively. The commitment to transparency intersected with discipline and motivation, highlighting the complex nature of coaching interventions and the need to contextualize them within the athlete's age, understanding, and developmental stage.

Theme 3: acting in alignment with values

Tensions surfaced between the coaches' personal values and the expectations and cultural norms assumed within the performance practices of the sport. Coaches articulated strong beliefs in long-term development, athlete-centered approaches, and ethical care. However, they often described circumstances in which those values were compromised, deferred, or overruled by situational demands or institutional pressures. In one remarkably candid moment, a coach reflected on an incident in which they failed to act according to their own moral compass. Faced with an athlete's misconduct and ongoing disruption, the coach admitted prioritizing the athlete's Olympic potential over addressing behavior that undermined the broader training culture:

> [At] that moment, I should have said, "This is how it is. [If] you get on Twitter again and start badmouthing the club and badmouthing the City Council and stuff, you need to get back on your bike." [i.e., leave the club]. But I never did because I balanced it out with, "She's got a chance of going to Rio … " In my own silly little world, I was caught up in that fairy tale of not living by my values and not treating everybody in the same manner. (Coach Andrew)

This passage provides insight into the ethical cost of high performance, where individual athletes' potential becomes a bargaining chip, and integrity is negotiated against opportunity. The coach's subsequent reflection highlights how values-based decision-making is often retrospective. Yet, moments of alignment were also visible, particularly in how some coaches sought to reframe success and resist performance-driven key performance indicators (KPIs). One coach shared how they had taken an intentional stance against outcome-based metrics:

> I'm now adamant that none of my KPIs should be results-based . . . My role isn't about chasing outcomes. It's about teaching, guiding, and laying foundations . . . Last year, we took a group [of gymnasts] to grades [an opportunity to gain a level of certification awarded by the NGB] to try and qualify for nationals. No one qualified, and I got told off for that. But to me, that misses the point. That wasn't failure; it was where they were meant to be. (Coach Jeremy)

In an environment where performance is measurable and evident for all to see, redefining what counts as success reflects a deep commitment to coaching as a relational, developmental practice. In this instance, complementarity takes on a broader meaning, not just about how athletes and coaches work together, but how coaches position their role within the ecosystem of long-term athlete development.

Another dimension of values-based coaching emerged in more intimate, floor-level interactions. In one example, a coach affirmed not just the gymnast's performance, but their self-belief and autonomy:

> I'm here to support you in every way. But you shouldn't trust me more than you trust yourself! I'm flattered you think like that, and I will do whatever I can for you. I'm so proud of what you just did, but I'm most proud that you believed in yourself. (Coach Jeremy)

This moment reflects a powerful expression of co-orientation, where the coach actively shifted power back to the athlete, reinforcing a dynamic of mutual respect and empowerment. However, acting aligned with values was not always easy, and coaches were aware of those around them who were behaving against their beliefs. One coach described a historical pattern of overloading gymnasts whose physical or mental profiles did not match the demands of elite routines:

> It's just the amount of kids that have been pushed to do more than they're capable of doing is unreal . . . What's the consequence to those athletes? . . . Burnout, breakage, leaving the sport early, resentment? (Coach Michael)

While coaches cannot change the past, these findings suggest that some have begun reevaluating their present-day practice, conscious of making future decisions more consistent with their professed values. In summary, "acting in alignment with values" is not a fixed concept; rather, it is an ongoing, negotiated process, shaped by reflection, resistance, and context. For many coaches, the challenge is not simply knowing what matters but staying true to their beliefs in an environment that can and often rewards the opposite.

Theme 4: personal coping mechanisms in a highly scrutinized environment

In a high-performance environment marked by relentless evaluation and emotional demand, coaches described the need to develop personal coping strategies, some of which

were constructive, while others were more destructive. These coping strategies often emerged from the necessity of dealing with the emotional load, perceived judgments, and the sense of being perpetually "on call." Coaches spoke about how the job had changed from being a joy (e.g., helping others) to a source of fatigue, in one case identifying colleagues who, after becoming parents, began to view coaching as "just a job" rather than a calling:

> Martha [a coaching colleague] is like, 'I love coaching, I love my job, but I don't love it as much as my family . . . I see it as a job now, whereas before it was a passion. Sandra [another coaching colleague] has been back two weeks after having a baby nine months ago, and she's like, "If I couldn't do this, I wouldn't." (Coach Andrew)

This illustration reveals how "life events" (e.g., having children) force coaches to reconsider their levels of commitment to their role. Significantly, this does not suggest a reduction in professionalism, but perhaps a revaluation of how unpaid/uncontracted time is spent. In this instance, the idea of closeness, traditionally seen as a strength in coach – athlete relationships, became more selectively applied, as coaches sought to preserve emotional energy.

In some cases, the burden of ongoing scrutiny led coaches to adopt darkly humorous, avoidant behaviors around even routine tasks. One coach reflected on their reluctance to read work-related e-mails, stating, "Maybe I won't read them this afternoon . . . Don't read them just before bed; I'd never sleep at all then! No, no. I'll be numb from the alcohol." (Coach Jeremy). In this passage, the humor from the coach is a masking of exhaustion, yet the underlying stress is real. Coaches described habits that ranged from emotional eating to alcohol use and late nights. These behaviors provided temporary relief but also reflected deeper struggles with work-life balance. When asked about what resources they had available to support their coping mechanisms, a coach responded, "My resources probably stretch to junk food, ****** diet, alcohol, late nights . . . rather than the meditation and exercise . . . But the last three weeks, I've been back in a routine. Gone back to the gym, playing golf again." (Coach Michael).

Though unhealthy, these habits illustrate the coaches' efforts to reclaim agency and decompress. Pursuing healthier coping mechanisms (e.g., exercise, sport, structure) was often framed as aspirational and temporary, rather than habitual.

Similarly, another coach reflected on how their compulsion to "take on too much" stemmed not from obligation, but a deep sense of care that caused the blurring of boundaries between personal responsibility and organizational accountability:

> Yeah, I could sit up here and demolish a packet of digestive biscuits because I'm not tackling the problems within my work . . . I want to make it a better working environment. . . . If I don't do it, then we could be up a s*#t creek. (Coach Jeremy)

This suggests that co-orientation can be stretched, not just between individuals, but between the coach and organization. Interestingly, this comment indicates that coaches can assume responsibility for institutional deficiencies, perceiving them as a personal failure. Over time, this may reinforce a cycle where their complementarity with others (i.e., coaches and management) in the environment becomes a source of burnout rather than balance. Ultimately, coaches' coping mechanisms revealed the hidden cost of maintaining relational stability in an environment that often fails to protect their own well-being. These strategies, whether humorous avoidance, emotional overextension, or personal restructuring,

demonstrate the complexity of needing to be relational in a system that does not always reciprocate the same level of care.

Theme 5: managing other coaches' egos

The data revealed that some coaches acknowledged tension around the need to navigate the personalities and egos of other coaches. While high-performance sport often promotes collaboration, all coaches described interpersonal dynamics that were shaped by status, power, and philosophical differences, which made it difficult to maintain trust, openness, and consistency within coaching teams. Importantly, there were contradictions in what some coaches said versus what they did (i.e., espoused theories and theories of action). For example, one coach reflected on the nature of some colleagues' professional development efforts, observing that, for some, image seemed to outweigh substance:

> I don't know if it's just gymnastics, but the size of the egos . . . There are a couple of good people out there . . . and they do want to learn. But the other side of the coin is people [who] like the idea of learning . . . they like the idea of being linked with certain influential figures. They're more into the networking and being seen than the actual development. (Coach Michael)

In this example, the coach clearly distinguishes between genuine learning and being associated with coaches in powerful positions. Significantly, this weakens co-orientation, where shared understanding and developmental alignment between coaches is replaced by surface-level engagement and self-promotion. Another coach described their response to a colleague's admission of being overly focused in practice and poor at communicating with other coaches:

> He [other coach] said, "I know I'm very focused when I'm in the gym. I'm very focused on what I need to do at that moment. So sometimes I'm not very good at communicating with others and stuff like that." And I just thought, "You know, he's just a bit of a **** really." That's not something to be proud of. You're basically saying you don't care how it lands on the people around you. (Coach Andrew)

This tension reflects a breakdown in complementarity, where roles and relational dynamics are no longer working in balance. Instead of mutual support, communication can become fractured and problematic because of ego. In contrast, some coaches intentionally resisted being part of an ego-driven culture, even if it meant being perceived as "too soft" to obtain elite success. One coach shared:

> One very highly thought of coach turned to me and said, "You're too nice." I was like, "I'm okay with that." If I'm not going to be the highest-level coach, I'm okay with that . . . I'd love to take kids to the Olympics. Of course I would, but not at the cost of treating people like they don't matter. (Coach Andrew)

This emphasizes a form of relational resistance; an intentional commitment to closeness and respect over hierarchy and control. Finally, conflict around athlete needs revealed how egos also shaped decisions about pedagogy and authority. One coach described a disagreement about how to support a gymnast with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder:

> There was one particular time where [Antony] just didn't want to do what I asked, had no intention of doing it. So, I kind of allowed him that moment . . . he just messed about on the trampoline for a bit. He needed the extra processing time. Me and Martin [another coach] had

> some friction about it because he said Anthony needed "a stronger male direction" – his words – more of a father figure to tell him what to do. But that didn't match what I'd read or what I felt Anthony needed in that moment. (Coach Jeremy)

This passage shows how co-orientation can become deeply problematic when coaches operate with different philosophies, agendas, and egos. In this instance, the conflict was not simply about method and delivery, but about identity, gender norms, and power within the coaching relationship.

These examples provide insight into how coaches frequently need to navigate others' egos. For many coaches, this took an emotional toll and created friction with colleagues. While some coaches found ways to hold their ground and retain relational integrity, others described the cost of working in a culture where visibility and control were often privileged over cooperation and mutual respect.

Discussion

We examined how coaches navigate the challenges of high-performance sport while ensuring athlete welfare. The findings illustrate the ongoing, complex challenges that coaches experience as they practice in a high-performance environment containing competing goals, coaches' egos, and increased scrutiny. The 3C's + 1 model (i.e., Closeness, Commitment, Complementarity, and Co-orientation; Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) provided a useful theoretical framework to explore how relational dynamics shape and confound this challenge. The results demonstrate that maintaining athlete welfare while simultaneously striving for elite performances is not simply a technical or procedural issue but is deeply personal and relational. Indeed, as evidenced, coaches often negotiate this challenge through ongoing interactions marked by trust, commitment, cooperation, and shared understanding.

Closeness emerged as a foundational but complex component in supporting athlete welfare. Coaches valued the emotional bonds with their athletes, emphasizing trust, respect, and appreciation as essential to fostering a supportive environment. These moments of closeness (e.g., affirming an athlete's self-belief and autonomy) are supported by research on autonomy-supportive coaching and its positive impact on athlete motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Yet, for coaches, this closeness was also a source of vulnerability. The emotional labor required to maintain such bonds under constant scrutiny and pressure often led coaches to consciously pull back, especially in response to life changes (e.g., becoming parents). Time management and the work-life balance are key factors in coach stress and burnout (Pearson et al., 2020).

Coaches identified other coaches and parents as the most influential external pressures. Tensions with other coaches often centered on issues of authority, recognition, and competing approaches to practice. On the other hand, parents exerted influence through expectations regarding athlete opportunities, performance outcomes, and communication. Notably, coaches are expected to "work with" both other coaches and parents; these groups often have contrasting and potentially competing agendas. While these pressures originate from different sources, both emerged as significant stressors on coach – athlete relationships.

In addition, the concept of closeness is complex; perspectives can (and do) change over time; what was traditionally not desirable may now be deemed acceptable. This is highly problematic in coaching when working with maturing athletes who need varying levels of support and guidance. Nevertheless, coaches sought to overcome this by acting with transparency. This tension reflects Cushion and Jones's (2014) suggestion that closeness in coaching relationships requires careful boundary management to protect the coach's well-being. Thus, closeness here is not a static given but a fluid state, demanding ongoing negotiation to balance care with self-preservation.

Commitment, or the intention to sustain relationships over time, revealed the ethical dilemmas coaches face in high-performance sport. The tension between upholding values centered on athlete welfare and succumbing to pressures from all relevant parties for results was a recurring theme. Coaches described situations where they compromised their moral compass, prioritizing an athlete's Olympic potential over addressing behavior that threatened the wider training culture, redolent of the moral conflicts coaches encounter within "win-at-all-costs" environments (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

However, there were also instances of resistance to socio-cultural pressures. For example, some coaches challenged outcome-based performance metrics by focusing on developmental progress rather than medals. This approach aligns with contemporary perspectives advocating for holistic athlete development that integrates well-being with performance (Henriksen et al., 2020). Importantly, in this study, commitment can be viewed as an ongoing, reflective process, rather than a fixed state, in which coaches continuously struggle with how best to stay true to their values.

Complementarity proved to be both a resource and a challenge. While effective collaboration between coaches is vital for athlete welfare, interpersonal dynamics were often complicated by factors such as different beliefs, approaches, and personal agendas. Prolonged exposure to performance pressures not only shapes day-to-day coaching practice but also carries significant long-term psychological and physical consequences. Coaches operating under sustained stress are at heightened risk of burnout, mental health difficulties, and diminished physical well-being, outcomes that can ultimately reduce both effectiveness and retention in the profession (Griffin et al., 2025; Kenttä et al., 2020).

Coaches noted that some colleagues prioritized image promotion and networking over authentic learning and cooperation, which, in turn, undermined trust and a collective team effort. Conversely, coaches who resisted ego-driven norms by prioritizing respect and relational integrity demonstrated a form of "relational resistance." Thus, developing and nurturing complementarity is not merely about relationships without conflict, but about cultivating ethical relationships that resist hierarchical, control-focused cultures (Rhind & Jowett, 2010).

Co-orientation, which is conceived as a shared understanding and agreement on roles and goals, was revealed as essential but also highly susceptible to social and cultural pressures. Misalignment between coaches, athletes, and parents frequently created tensions, particularly around communication and pedagogical approaches. There were inter-coach disagreements and differences about coaching identity, authority, and gender norms. There were also examples of how coaches actively supported gymnasts' autonomy and nurtured confidence. In this fashion, co-orientation can be purposefully nurtured to align athlete welfare with the expectations of high performance. Nonetheless, the contested nature of co-orientation in high-pressure environments also illustrates how power dynamics and

systemic factors influence coach-athlete relationships, sometimes constraining the extent to which coaches can align with athlete welfare ideals (Potrac & Jones, 2009). This suggests that co-orientation is a critical, though vulnerable and fragile, relational mechanism through which coaches manage the welfare-performance paradox.

These findings demonstrate that the challenge of balancing athlete welfare and performance is fundamentally a relational one. Coaches do not operate in isolation; their ability to care for athletes depends on navigating emotional closeness without overextending themselves, maintaining ethical commitment amid systemic pressures, fostering genuine cooperation in the face of ego and competition, and cultivating shared understanding despite diverse and sometimes conflicting stakeholder perspectives.

Recommendations for action

As a result of our findings, we now propose recommendations across three levels to support more "ethically grounded" and relationally effective coaching in high-performance environments. At the policy level, NGBs could expand their understanding of coaching excellence to include relational competencies, embedding athlete-centered practice, communication, and relational integrity into coach education and appraisal systems. This would shift the focus away from narrow outcome-driven metrics and toward a more holistic understanding of coaching quality.

At the club level, organizations could implement systems and processes (e.g., charters, peer mentoring systems, routine reflective forums) that would help to enhance consistency across coaching teams and ensure that both athlete welfare and performance are treated as *shared responsibilities*. However, this would require careful consideration and selection of appropriate mentors.

At the individual level, there should be a commitment to ongoing self-reflection and learning. Coaches should examine how their own values, communication styles, and response to pressure influence their relationships with athletes and colleagues. Supporting this recommendation, the work of coach developers has been shown to be highly effective in facilitating reflection and collaboratively identifying coaches' training needs (Quick & Baghurst, 2025). Collectively, these actions can help move high-performance coaching cultures toward more ethical, balanced, and sustainable forms of practice.

Limitations and future research

It is important to acknowledge the study's limitations, which present areas of future research. First, this research was conducted within a single gymnastics center in the U.K., which limits the generalizability of findings across other sports or contexts. The intensive, long-term nature of the ethnography provided deep access. However, it also meant that interpretations were, to some extent, shaped by the primary researcher's positionality and evolving relationships within the field. Second, while efforts were made to include a range of perspectives, including coaches, gymnasts, and parents, some stakeholders may not have fully expressed their views. Gymnastics is arguably the most scrutinized sport at the time of data collection. However, this also

significantly contributes to the research's originality, novelty, and significance. Third, the reliance on self-reported data in interviews brings potential biases, as participants may have presented their actions or experiences in ways that align with socially desirable narratives. These limitations do not undermine the study's value but highlight the need for further research across diverse settings and using complementary methods.

Future research should explore how coaches' relational strategies evolve *over time* as they respond to shifting welfare-performance demands. Investigating broader structural influences (e.g., national governing body vs. club-led), including funding mechanisms (e.g., private vs. public) and cultural norms, would also enrich understanding of barriers to relationally ethical coaching. Finally, future research could explore the role and influence of parents on coach-athlete relationships, providing valuable insights for coach education on how best to train coaches to navigate difficult conversations with parents. Navigating the cost-benefits of transparency with relevant parties, such as parents and athletes, is a fruitful area of research.

Conclusion

Exploring the lived realities of coaching in an environment of conflicting priorities between welfare and performance revealed a complex web of factors that shaped coaches' outlook on practice and relationships. Colleagues, parents, athletes, and performance expectations can strain their day-to-day work and coach-athlete and coach-coach relationships. This can be particularly problematic for coaches who are unaware of how these external pressures may be influencing their behavior. The findings highlight a clear need for coach education to go beyond technical and tactical knowledge to address coaches' capacity to preserve the integrity of the coach-athlete relationship and protect themselves from environmental pressures that may distort their values and practice.

This study makes a significant and original contribution to research by identifying the negotiated nature of relational dynamics among coaches and between coaches, athletes, and other stakeholders. Relationships were shown to be fluid, fragile, contested, and with an ethical dimension. Coaches' capacity to cope with this fundamental aspect of the coaching process may prove to be a valuable evaluative yardstick of effective professional practice.

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