



Research Repository

Why Context Matters: An Exploration of How Sporting Characteristics Shape Coaching Practice

Accepted for publication in the Journal of Teaching in Physical Education

Research Repository link: <https://repository.essex.ac.uk/42923/>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite this paper.

<https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2025-0434>

**Why Context Matters: An Exploration of How Sporting Characteristics Shape
Coaching Practice**

AUTHOR NOTE

Abstract

Understanding coaching behaviors across different sports is essential for developing effective, context-sensitive coaching practices. Examining how coaches operate in varied environments can inform coach education and curriculum design. Using comparative thematic analysis, we explored both shared and divergent coaching behaviors across three sports: netball, tennis, and athletics. Nine UK Coaching Certificate Level Two coaches (five male, four female) working with junior athletes (aged 8–16) participated in semi-structured online interviews. Four core behavioral themes emerged: (1) modeling, (2) physical maneuvering, (3) feedback, and (4) questioning. Sport-specific nuances were evident in visual demonstrations, physical guidance, motivational strategies, and feedback timing. Netball sport coaches emphasized performance analytics and authoritative communication, while athletics and tennis coaches favored autonomy, subtle motivation, and reflexive questioning. Safeguarding concerns shaped physical contact across all sports, and a shared commitment to athlete development influenced communication. The study highlights the need for coach education to reflect personalized philosophies and sport-specific realities of coaching.

Keywords: Pedagogy, constraints, behaviors, sport-specific, sport-types

Why Context Matters: An Exploration of How Sporting Characteristics Shape Coaching Practice

Pedagogy in sport coaching is central to athlete development, with the coach acting as an instructor and facilitator of learning, motivation, and performance (Quick & Baghurst, 2025). High-quality coaching has been consistently linked to improved athlete outcomes, including technical proficiency, tactical understanding, and psychological growth (Dohme et al., 2019). Effective coaching involves carefully planning, delivering, and reflecting sessions tailored to the athlete's developmental stage (Cushion et al., 2012). Athlete learning is strongly supported by the coach's ability to apply appropriate pedagogical strategies such as modeling, feedback, questioning, and physical guidance, which must align with the athlete's needs and the specific demands of the sport (Light & Harvey, 2015). Therefore, pedagogy's role in sport is not fixed, but adaptable and responsive to both individual and environmental influences (Correia et al., 2018).

Despite this, the unique constraints within which coaches operate (i.e., within particular sport types) are often overlooked in the literature (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). These constraints can include the structural features of a sport, resource availability, time pressures, group sizes, and broader socio-cultural expectations. Coaches must constantly manage these factors, and how they instruct, provide feedback, and build relationships with their athletes are shaped by this (Oliveira et al., 2022; Otte et al., 2020). For example, the dynamic and fast-paced nature of team sports may limit opportunities for detailed technical corrections. In contrast, individual sports may allow for more focused and specific instruction (Quick et al., 2025a, 2025b). However, research on coaching often assesses effectiveness in general terms, without fully considering how environmental and structural constraints shape coaching practices.

Formal coach education provided by national governing bodies typically offers substantial sport-specific technical instruction, but tends to prioritize rules, skills, and safety requirements over broader pedagogical and interpersonal competencies. As a result, although these programs are tailored to particular sports, they often provide limited guidance on *how* to teach, communicate, or respond to contextual coaching challenges (Campbell & Sullivan, 2005; Nash et al., 2017). Similarly, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses often adopt a broad, overarching approach with limited attention to learner-centred pedagogy or context-sensitive coaching practices, resulting in gaps in coaches' ability to transfer knowledge to their specific coaching environments (Nash et al., 2017; Quick & Baghurst, 2025).

In this study, we use the term coach education to refer specifically to the formal, structured education and continuing professional development opportunities provided by sport governing bodies and organizations. We recognize that coach education can take many different forms, from brief, introductory clinics designed for parent volunteers to extended, advanced-level courses for regional or national team coaches. Our focus, however, is on entry-level and participation-oriented courses, which tend to emphasize technical and safety-related content while offering limited attention to pedagogy, athlete-centered practice, or context-responsive coaching.

Approaches to Categorize Sports

The Council of Europe's Sports Charter defines sport as "all forms of physical activity aiming to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being, obtaining results in competition levels and forming social relationships" (Council of Europe, 2021, p. 3). However, this definition has been critiqued for its limited scope, as it does not adequately encompass the full range of sporting activities. For instance, Pill (2021) contended that existing classifications fail to account for sports such as athletics (e.g., track and field),

swimming, and rowing, thereby highlighting the need for a broader, more inclusive framework. To address these limitations, alternative models have been proposed within Physical Education.

Earlier developments in physical education pedagogy shifted attention from isolated skill drills toward the shared tactical and structural features of game forms (O'Connor et al., 2022), leading to the widespread use of game classification systems, including invasion, net/wall, striking and fielding, and target games. More recently, O'Connor et al. (2022) have proposed an expanded classification model that reflects a contemporary rethinking of traditional game categories by attending more closely to pedagogical intent and contextual variability. While such models remain useful for pedagogical organization and comparative analysis, the present study focuses on three specific sports (i.e., netball, tennis, and athletics) in order to avoid conceptual ambiguity and to more fully capture the contextual realities of coaching practice within each sport.

Each sport has its own characteristics and criteria for athlete performance and success (Martens & Vealey, 2024; Williams et al., 2023). Different sports create differences in team dynamics, individual versus collective performance, and the specific demands athletes face (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). Team sports involve fostering team cohesion, developing game strategies, and addressing the mental challenges athletes face (Bruner et al., 2014). In contrast, individual sports focus more on mental conditioning and targeted performance analysis, including specific feedback to support athlete motivation (Veljkovic et al., 2016).

For coaches, each type of sport presents a unique set of challenges. Practically, a tennis coach cannot offer much instruction during match points. Therefore, verbal cues may need to be delayed until a natural pause occurs in the performance, such as between games or sets. Equally, team sport (e.g., netball) coaches may struggle to determine when to intervene during scrimmaging or small-sided games (Zeng et al., 2009), and they may be physically

distant from the athletes, such as on the opposite side of a playing field. Consequently, coaches are forced to navigate the constructs and confines of their sport. To date, there has been limited research into the education of coaches and whether they are required to adapt to differences in their athletes or the sport more broadly (Lyle, 2007).

Adapting Coaching Practices Across Sports

This study explored the behaviours of coaches in tennis, athletics (track and field), and netball. These sports were selected to provide varied and contrasting examples. Tennis can be considered an individual or a team sport (thus highlighting the issue of categorizing sport by organizational structure), with physical demands that vary in intensity and match duration (Fernandez et al., 2006). Athletics (i.e., track and field), examined here as an individual sport, focuses more on technique and coordination, with performance outcomes being immediately visible (Uskova et al., 2023). Netball is a high-intensity, court-based team sport where success is largely determined by the team's overall performance rather than individual achievements. It requires complex decision-making shaped by communication and team cohesion (Whitehead et al., 2021). These three sports have unique characteristics and demands, which likely shape coaching strategies in distinct ways. Feedback, a fundamental coaching tool, may be constrained in team settings, such as netball, or in time-limited individual events, like athletics (Corbett et al., 2024; Otte et al., 2020). Tennis coaches may also face difficulties observing performance due to their dual role as feeder and instructor during sessions.

Given that each sport has distinct performance demands, coaches must work within the expectations, constraints, and learning environments shaped by their sport and its stakeholders (Kim et al., 2024). These contextual demands influence not only *what* coaches teach but also *how* they teach it. Investigating how coaches adapt their pedagogical approaches (particularly their instructional behaviours) in response to their sport's specific

demands offers important insight for course design and coach development. For example, the technical content required in netball may differ from that in track and field; however, both coaches still rely on underlying instructional processes, such as organizing practice tasks, providing feedback, and responding to athletes' needs.

Understanding both the similarities and differences in coaching practices across contrasting sports helps clarify how sport-specific contexts shape athlete learning and guide coaches' instructional decision-making. Put simply, our focus is not on transferring technical strategies from one sport to another, but on identifying the broader pedagogical principles and reasoning processes that coaches use across varied environments (Quick & Lyle, 2024). These cross-sport insights can inform coach education by helping developers integrate the practical realities of coaching in different sports while strengthening the pedagogical components of training.

Therefore, we explored the lived experiences and instructional strategies of coaches from various sports to gain a deeper understanding of how sport-specific characteristics influence coaching behaviour. These insights contribute to coaching education and development programs by highlighting the contextual factors that shape practice and identifying pedagogical competencies that are applicable across sports.

Accordingly, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do coaches perceive the unique characteristics of the sports they coach (e.g., netball, tennis, and track and field), and how do these characteristics influence their coaching approach?

RQ2: What sport-specific characteristics present challenges for coaches when delivering information, structuring sessions, facilitating learning, and assessing athlete development?

Methods

Research Design and Setting

This study employed a comparative qualitative research design to explore similarities and differences in coaches' behavior across three sports. This design was chosen because it enables a detailed, contextualized understanding of how coaching practices manifest across various sporting contexts, highlighting both shared strategies and sport-specific nuances. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the inclusion of information-rich participants who met the research's inclusion criteria (Rai & Thapa, 2015). By comparing across sports, the study aimed to generate insights that could inform both theory and practice, revealing patterns and contrasts that might otherwise be overlooked in single-sport investigations.

Participants

Participants were nine coaches (five male, four female) from three contrasting sports: netball ($n = 3$), tennis ($n = 3$), and athletics ($n = 3$). To be included in the study, coaches were required to: (a) hold a United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC) Level Two qualification or higher, (b) have at least two years of coaching experience, (c) actively coach junior-level athletes aged 8–16 who compete at a regional level, and (d) be currently practicing in their respective sport. Coaches had a mean age of 43 years ($Range = 20–65$) and an average of 13 years of coaching experience ($Range = 2–30$).

Instruments

Data were generated through semi-structured online interviews. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate, as they provided a clear focus while allowing participants the flexibility to expand on their responses in ways most relevant to their experiences (Adeoye-Olatunde, 2021). The interview questions were informed by the Coach Analysis Intervention System (CAIS; Harvey et al., 2013), a validated framework that categorizes coaching behaviors, including instruction, feedback, and management practices. Basing the questions

on CAIS ensured that key domains of coaching behavior were systematically addressed while retaining the flexibility to explore participants' unique perspectives.

Although CAIS is typically used as a systematic observation tool, it was not employed in this study for direct observation because the research aim was to capture coaches' subjective experiences, decision-making rationales, and contextual considerations, which cannot be fully observed in real-time. Interviews allowed participants to reflect on their reasoning, challenges, and strategies across different situations, providing richer insight into coaching behaviors than observation alone could achieve. Example questions included:

“What are the challenges of coaching your sport?” “When do you feel is the best time to provide feedback to your athletes or team and why?”, and “What is the most effective way to teach skills in your sport and why?”

Procedures

Prior to participant recruitment, the ethics committee of the corresponding author's institution approved the study. A purposive and snowball sampling approach was used to recruit participants. Initially, the lead researcher had a personal contact with a coach in each sport, who then facilitated introductions to other coaches. Purposive sampling ensured that participants were information-rich and met the study's inclusion criteria, while snowball sampling helped access additional coaches within their networks. To maximize variation and capture diverse perspectives, participants were recruited across three contrasting sports (netball, tennis, athletics), with a range of coaching experience (2–30 years), age (20–65 years), and gender (five male, four female). Although snowball sampling can sometimes yield similar viewpoints through social networks, combining it with purposive selection ensured the sample included a variety of coaching experiences and contexts, mitigating potential homogeneity and enriching the data.

After participants were identified, the lead researcher sent an email outlining the study's details, including the required qualifications, the type of data to be collected, and the collection methods. Attached to the email were consent forms for the participants to complete.

After completing and returning the consent form, a mutually agreed-upon time was set for the interview. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes, yielding approximately six hours of interview data collected over two months. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, which allowed access to coaches who might otherwise have been unavailable. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in real time using the software. After the interview, the lead researcher rewatched the video recordings for transcript accuracy. Where necessary, changes were made along with minor grammatical adjustments to transcriptions (e.g., removing “um, uh” to assist with readability).

Data Analysis

A Comparative Thematic Analysis was conducted to analyze the data. This analysis method is relatively recent, developed to explore differences in perceptions between and across groups (Sun et al., 2025). The process included six stages (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2023). Stage one involved familiarization, where the researchers immersed themselves deeply in the data; they rewatched the Zoom calls and re-read and analyzed the transcripts (Braun et al., 2023). The transcripts were written as ‘researcher’ and ‘coach (number)’, so the participants were anonymous. This was vital for the reliability of the interview; the process was repeated for all participants.

Stage two was the initial code generation in which the researchers systematically identified and labeled sections of data with codes (Braun et al., 2023). This was accomplished by printing the transcripts, highlighting, and coding each phrase; approximately 75% of the transcripts were thus highlighted and coded. Some examples of codes identified included:

type of skill, importance to younger athletes, use of self-demonstration, specific skill, encouraging discussion, help with a specific skill, using questions to understand, and use of specific feedback. Across all transcripts, there were over 250 codes, averaging 27-30 per transcript. An example of the process, Coach 4 stated, “I would tend to use that a lot, particularly with younger athletes.” Here, the researcher highlighted and coded its importance to younger athletes. Another example included Coach 2, who stated, “If they’re a beginner, I would demonstrate to them”, the researcher labeled this “use of self-demonstration.”

The next stage generated initial themes, where the codes began to be organized and grouped into themes (Braun et al., 2023). The primary researcher grouped common codes and topics into categories before creating a table that reflected the first-order theme, followed by the second-order theme, and was supported by relevant quotations. The fourth stage was theme review, where the researchers critically evaluated the themes to ensure they were representative of the data. In this study, the researchers reflected on the themes derived from the data and ensured their validity.

The penultimate stage included theme definition and naming, which were finalized and given descriptive names (Braun et al., 2023). Four first-order themes were identified: modeling, physical maneuvering, feedback, and questioning. The final phase of reflexive thematic analysis was the production of a report. In this phase, a table was created to condense the findings.

Results and Discussion

The results from the interviews and analysis are presented in Table 1. Four themes were developed: modeling, physical maneuvering, feedback, and questioning. We distinguish between feedback and questioning as separate instructional behaviors observed in the data.

Specific quotes supporting each theme have been blended into the discussion. For clarity, coaches are grouped as follows: 1-3 (tennis), 4-6 (athletics), and 7-9 (netball).

TABLE 1 HERE

We investigated the similarities and differences between coaches' processes when practicing in different sports (i.e., tennis, netball, and athletics). Although the CAIS system informed our interview guide by highlighting common instructional behaviors, it did not restrict the scope of the study's analysis. We recognize that effective pedagogy encompasses a broad range of elements, including task presentation, task development, knowledge organization, assessment practices, and behavior management. The themes developed in this article reflect the pedagogical processes that were most salient in the coaches' lived experiences rather than an exhaustive account of all pedagogical dimensions. As such, the discussion offers insight into the pedagogical aspects that coaches themselves perceived as central to their practice within their sport-specific contexts.

For reference, we sought to answer the following research questions: RQ1: How do coaches perceive the unique characteristics of the sports they coach (e.g., netball, tennis, and athletics), and how do these influence their coaching approach? RQ2: What sport-specific characteristics present challenges for coaches when delivering information, structuring sessions, facilitating learning, and assessing athlete development? The following section presents the key findings of this study.

Modeling

Modeling is an important feature of coaching practice as it allows athletes to view the "correct" technique and how skills can be executed. Modeling emerged as a key theme, encompassing both positive and negative approaches to demonstrating correct and incorrect techniques (Stodter & Cushion, 2019). Coaches across both athletics and netball reported

Sporting Characteristics and Coaching Practice

using self-demonstration and athlete demonstration, selecting athletes based on their experience levels. For example, Coach 7 (netball) stated:

[I like] showing them, like assessing where they are with their techniques and then showing them how it should be done, then resetting them back to have a go at it, and then going around and speaking to athletes and correcting positioning... I often use participant demonstration for this.

This practice of choosing experienced athletes for demonstrations aligns with Burton and Wright's (2022) assertion that observational learning enhances skill acquisition. Netball coaches also reported using external video analysis to provide athletes with visual feedback on errors and correct performance. This may reflect the availability of resources such as multi-angle cameras and tactical software (Lyle & Cushion, 2010, 2017). However, Coach 8 (netball) noted practical challenges: "I have used video, but it's just the access to the IT and the ease of using it and how long it takes to always set it up and having the space to do that."

In contrast to sports such as athletics and tennis, where actions are often discrete and temporally unconstrained (Stein et al., 2017), video analysis in netball sports allows for detailed breakdowns of complex gameplay. Notably, netball coaches expressed that breaking down skills was often unhelpful, while individual sport coaches viewed it as beneficial. For instance, Coach 8 (netball) noted, "Shooting technique is different, I like people to feel it and learn it through the full movement." Conversely, Coach 6 (athletics) described segmenting movement through the verbal cue "Hop, swap, and jump" to enhance athlete comprehension. Tennis coaches also emphasized the value of allowing athletes to experience the consequences of their actions. Coach 3 remarked, "I might let them get it wrong once." Compared to team environments, analyzing movement in sports like tennis may be more manageable because skill execution is more isolated.

Physical Maneuvering

The second-order theme identified was physical maneuvering. Physically maneuvering athletes requires coaches to touch athletes to move body parts into certain positions. This can benefit athletes who are new to the sport and are unfamiliar with the correct body position. Moreover, physical maneuvering is often necessary in certain sports where safety is a concern (e.g., catching a gymnast when they dismount). Across all sports in this study, coaches reported asking for athlete consent before physical contact, reflecting broader safeguarding practices emphasized by national governing bodies (e.g., Reform 25 as part of British Gymnastics, 2022; Quick et al., 2025c). In netball, physical contact was typically limited to skills requiring safety and precision, such as shooting. As noted by Coach 7 (netball), “If the arm is not in the right place and we're trying to look at a specific [ball outcome].” Similarly, tennis coaches used physical positioning to correct body mechanics during ball striking, although individual sport coaches generally avoided all physical contact. This avoidance may stem from heightened scrutiny of physical interactions between coaches and athletes. As suggested by Ryou et al. (2025), some coaches refrain from physical touch to avoid potential allegations of misconduct.

Tennis sport coaches reported using implements rather than direct body contact for instructional purposes. Coach 3 (tennis) stated, “I might use their racket to maneuver instead of their actual body [so] they can feel the correct motion.” This method emphasizes the importance of tactile feedback in reinforcing accurate movement patterns, particularly in technically demanding sports like tennis. In contrast, individual sport coaches consistently reported avoiding physical contact, possibly due to the heightened risk of misinterpretation or allegations of inappropriate conduct.

Feedback

Coaches across all domains emphasized the importance of positive feedback, which is defined as reinforcement following successful behaviors to encourage continued performance

(Mouratidis et al., 2008). Coaches working with younger athletes noted the importance of using simple, constructive language. For example, Coach 2 (tennis) explained, “They [young athletes] don’t want to hear you chatting to them; they drift off. Using things like pop in, pop out! It’s very helpful.” Positive reinforcement was considered critical across all age groups, although netball coaches tended to associate praise with earned achievements. Coach 9 (netball) expressed: “Athletes should have to work for praise... make the athletes feel like they deserve it... if someone's not pulling their weight and work ethic, they’re not getting much out of me.”

These findings suggest that coaches may reserve praise for notable effort or performance in team sports where larger group sizes and interpersonal competition are common (Franken et al., 1995). The emphasis on the strategic allocation of coach attention highlights a complex interplay of factors, including season phase, athlete role, coach experience, and session dynamics (Quick & Lyle, 2024). Tennis coaches, by contrast, placed greater emphasis on fostering a positive learning environment. Coach 2 (tennis) noted that “Everything is about culture and climate... the more positive the environment, the easier it is to do skill development.” In individual sports, where coaching typically occurs one-on-one, the quality of the coach-athlete relationship appears particularly significant.

Despite the importance placed on positive reinforcement, all coaches acknowledged the role of negative feedback in their coaching approach. In netball and tennis, negative feedback was sometimes accompanied by physical punishment (e.g., running, cardio drills, or removal from the game):

I think, yeah, to focus the mind so people realize that there is a consequence to what they do. Another example is like shooting stats. So I have in the team... I currently coach a lot of girls who want to be shooters. So I've started to take their stats, and whoever has the lowest one will be the one I ask to play a different position in the last

quarter because I'm trying to get everyone on court the same amount. But basically, the better the stats, the more you'll play in the game. (Coach 8, netball).

Coach 1 (tennis) described such strategies as a means to improve fitness and regain attention. Similarly, netball coaches used running drills to reinforce expectations when athletes were inattentive. In all sports, coaches emphasized the importance of specific and actionable feedback over general criticism. Blunt language, characterized by direct, often harsh phrasing, was especially common in team settings, where limited time necessitated efficient communication. Nonetheless, both tennis and athletics coaches described adopting more supportive and optimistic philosophies.

Coach 6 (athletics) emphasized the importance of “positive cues” and advocated for the “sandwich form” of feedback (i.e., positive-negative-positive). These findings suggest that some differences in feedback practices were influenced by the structural demands of the sport, such as group size, continuous play, or limited time for individual attention. In contrast, other aspects, including the use of positive reinforcement, supportive language, and the “sandwich” feedback approach, appeared primarily shaped by coaches’ personal philosophies. Thus, while the sport context can constrain when and how feedback is delivered, the underlying style and emphasis on constructive or motivating feedback largely reflect individual coaching beliefs and values.

Questioning

Coaches often use questioning as an assessment tool to gauge their players' level of understanding. Moreover, it can also be used to guide learning, if framed correctly (i.e., open questions paired with skillful coach responses). Questioning was common across all sports and was used to promote athlete reflection and understanding (Cope et al., 2016). Coaches described how prompting athletes to think critically enhanced engagement and performance. For example, Coach 4 (athletics) posed the reflective question: “If we were focusing on this,

how far would you be able to go? What next?” Similarly, Coach 2 (tennis) described asking: “What would you then be able to do next if this happened?” These open-ended prompts scaffolded learning and encouraged athlete autonomy.

In netball, the timing and structure of questioning appeared to be contingent on contextual factors. Due to the dynamic and time-sensitive nature of team play, coaches tended to use concise directives rather than extended dialogues (Mesquita et al., 2008). Coach 9 (netball) also highlighted the influence of external voices on athlete perceptions: “There are all sorts of influences: PE teachers, what they watch on TV, etc.” Such perspectives, including those of parents, peers, and media, can create misalignment between coaching intentions and athlete expectations (Baghurst & Parish, 2022).

Furthermore, netball coaches reported that athletes rarely initiated questions. This trend may reflect hierarchical structures within team environments (Rylander, 2016), where coaches are perceived as authority figures, much like teachers in formal educational settings. Such dynamics may inhibit athlete inquiry, reinforcing traditional coach-centered approaches to instruction.

Additional Motivational Behaviors

Motivational behaviors were defined as deliberate actions coaches take to inspire athletes and enhance performance (Mageau, 2003). These motivational strategies can be interpreted through Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that supporting athletes’ needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhances intrinsic motivation. A prominent strategy in both netball and tennis was fostering intra-team or intra-player competition. Coach 7 (netball) explained: “Giving them a goal and making it as competitive as possible...whether it’s one-versus-one or a team.” Fostering intra-team competition in team sports may particularly support athletes’ sense of competence, as clear performance goals allow them to track progress and mastery. Across all sports, athletes’

Sporting Characteristics and Coaching Practice

attention during instruction was emphasized, though team coaches were more likely to integrate instructional pauses within the flow of practice (Lee et al., 2021). This approach reflects the nature of team-based drills and small-sided games, which allow for organic stoppages and breaks.

Athletics coaches described their motivational style as “subtle,” with some viewing their presence as a “silent motivator.” Subtle or “silent” motivational strategies in individual sports appear to foster autonomy, enabling athletes to self-regulate and reflect without constant external pressure. These coaches noted that they sometimes refrained from giving real-time feedback in favor of quiet observation. Conversely, netball coaches emphasized the importance of body language, vocal tone, and communication style. Coach 7 (netball) noted: “Your voice is quite motivating, and the tone can be serious when needed to motivate particular athletes.” Coaches’ attention to body language, tone, and feedback in team environments can also facilitate relatedness, helping athletes feel supported and socially connected, even in larger group sizes. In large-group environments, such communication efficiency becomes crucial due to limited time for personalized feedback.

Another distinguishing feature of netball coaches was the regular use of performance statistics. Coaches monitored individual data to assess and enhance motivation. Coach 8 (netball) described using individual performance reports to supplement coaching evaluations. The availability of advanced technological tools and video analysis made this approach especially feasible in team sport settings. The integration of performance statistics and pre-activity routines reflects an approach that simultaneously promotes competence and autonomy, providing athletes with concrete information to guide their improvement while allowing them some control over their learning.

A bespoke motivational strategy identified in tennis was using warm-ups to prime the athlete's focus. Coach 1 (tennis) explained: “Normally, I’ll try and do a more intense warm-up

to get them more alert straight away.” This practice, supported by Silva et al. (2018), highlights the role of pre-activity routines in enhancing both physical readiness and mental alertness. Notably, this was emphasized only by tennis coaches.

Study Limitations and Future Research

Although this research provided insight into coaching differences between sports, it is important to reflect on its limitations and potential avenues for further research. First, the sample size was small, with only nine participants and three different sports. This affects the generalizability of findings to other sports. Second, all coaches in the study coached younger athletes. This made it unclear whether responses were influenced by sport characteristics or the domain in which they were coaching. Future research should involve a larger sample and a broader range of athlete ages. Third, coaching experience varied, as the required qualification level was low; some had more experience at higher levels. Fourth, categorizing sports into team, net/wall, and individual types may limit generalizability, as coaching behaviors in other sports or contexts may not align neatly with these classifications. Finally, interviews may induce social desirability bias (Brenner & DeLamater, 2014), where coaches provide expected responses rather than their genuine opinions. This bias can lead to data that reflects perceived norms rather than authentic perspectives.

Further inquiry could build on these findings by examining how coaching practices vary not only across sports but also across developmental domains and performance contexts within the same sport. Longitudinal and multi-method designs would help to address potential social desirability bias and provide a richer account of enacted coaching practice. In addition, comparative studies involving coaches working across multiple sports or transitioning between sports may offer further insight into the extent to which sport-specific demands versus transferable pedagogical principles shape coaching behaviors. Finally, while game classification frameworks offer useful heuristics, future research might continue to

interrogate the limits of such models by exploring how contextual, cultural, and institutional factors intersect with sport-specific logics to influence coaching pedagogy in practice.

Conclusion

We explored the similarities and differences in coaching practices across netball, tennis, and athletics. Findings revealed both overlapping strategies and notable distinctions, shaped primarily by the sport's structural nature, the coach-athlete ratio, and contextual demands such as resource availability and time constraints. One of the clearest commonalities across all sports was the value placed on modeling through coach demonstration and peer examples (Bruton, 2022). However, netball coaches leaned more heavily on video analysis due to greater technological access, while athletics and tennis coaches focused more on immediate athlete feedback and movement compartmentalization. This difference underscores how sport-specific constraints shape the coaching process. For instance, complex one-on-one actions in athletics require a breakdown of movements, whereas in netball, the broader game context is more dominant. Regarding physical maneuvering, coaches consistently demonstrated awareness of and sensitivity to the need for athletes' consent, reflecting the current coaching climate. Interestingly, tennis sport coaches utilized tools (e.g., rackets) for physical correction rather than touching the athlete directly, balancing instruction with professional boundaries. In contrast, coaches of athletics largely avoided physical contact, likely due to heightened scrutiny and concerns about risk.

Feedback practices revealed a shared appreciation for both positive reinforcement and constructive criticism. Netball coaches emphasized earned praise and were more likely to employ blunt, time-efficient communication due to the group dynamics. In contrast, athletics coaches stressed the importance of a supportive atmosphere and used structured feedback, such as the “sandwich method,” to guide athletes. Motivational behaviors, such as role

modeling and performance tracking, were prevalent in netball, while athletics coaches relied more on personal presence and relational depth to inspire their athletes. Questioning techniques were used across all groups but varied in depth and timing. Netball coaches favored rapid instructions and hierarchical control, whereas tennis and athletics coaches encouraged greater critical thinking and collaborative engagement.

Implications for Coaches and Coach Education

These findings have important implications for coach education and continuing professional development (CPD). Training programs should emphasize how coaching strategies can be adapted to sport-specific structures, athlete-coach ratios, and contextual demands, while also considering individual coaching philosophies and styles. For example, netball coaches may benefit from guidance on delivering feedback efficiently to large groups and using performance data to enhance motivation. In contrast, athletics and tennis coaches might focus on fostering relational depth and structured skill breakdowns. CPD initiatives could also integrate strategies for safe and professional physical instruction, consent awareness, and ethical considerations in athlete interaction. By reflecting on both shared practices and sport-specific distinctions, coaches can refine their approaches to better support athletes' psychological needs - autonomy, competence, and relatedness - across different sporting contexts. Overall, these insights highlight the importance of tailoring professional development to the distinct demands and opportunities of each sport type.

References

Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358–1367. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441>

- Baghurst, T., & Parish, A. (2022). *Case studies in coaching ethics: Real dilemmas in high school, college, and professional sports*. New York: Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., Davey, L., & Jenkinson, E. (2023). Doing reflexive thematic analysis. In *Supporting research in counselling and psychotherapy: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research* (pp. 19–38). Springer International Publishing.
- Brenner, P. S., & DeLamater, J. D. (2014). Social desirability bias in self-reports of physical activity: Is an exercise identity the culprit? *Social Indicators Research*, 117(2), 489–504. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-013-0359-y>
- British Gymnastics. (2022). Reform ‘25. British Gymnastics.
<https://www.british-gymnastics.org/reform-25>
- Bruner, M. W., Eys, M. A., Wilson, K. S., & Côté, J. (2014). Group cohesion and positive youth development in team sport athletes. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 3(4), 219–227. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000017>
- Bruton, A. M., & Wright, D. J. (2022, April 12). *Watch and learn: Athletes can improve by observing the actions of others*. *Frontiers for Young Minds*, 10, Article 702784.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/frym.2022.702784>
- Campbell, T., & Sullivan, P. (2005). The effect of a standardized coaching education program on the efficacy of novice coaches. *Avante*, 11(1), 38–45.
- Correia, V., Carvalho, J., Araújo, D., Pereira, E., & Davids, K. (2018). Principles of nonlinear pedagogy in sport practice. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 24(2), 117–132.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2018.1552673>

Committee of Ministers. (2021, October 13). *Recommendation CM/Rec(2021)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the Revised European Sports Charter*.

Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/1680a47d17>

Cope, E., Partington, M., Cushion, C. J., & Harvey, S. (2016). An investigation of professional top-level youth football coaches' questioning practice. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 8(4), 380–393.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2016.1157829>

Corbett, R., Partington, M., Ryan, L., & Cope, E. (2024). A systematic review of coach augmented verbal feedback during practice and competition in team sports.

International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching, 19(2), 864–881.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541231218665>

Cushion, C., Ford, P. R., & Williams, A. M. (2012). Coach behaviours and practice structures in youth soccer: Implications for talent development. *Journal of Sports Sciences*,

30(15), 1631–1641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2012.721930>

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “What” and “Why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.

https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01

Dohme, L., Piggott, D., Backhouse, S., & Morgan, G. (2019). Psychological skills and characteristics facilitative of youth athletes' development: A systematic review. *The Sport Psychologist*, 33(4), 261–275.

<https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2018-0014>

Fernandez, J., Mendez-Villanueva, A., & Pluim, B. M. (2006). Intensity of tennis match play. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 40(5), 387–391.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsm.2005.023168>

Franken, R. E., & Brown, D. J. (1995). Why do people like competition? The motivation for winning, putting forth effort, improving one's performance, performing well, being

- instrumental, and expressing forceful/aggressive behavior. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 19(2), 175–184. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869\(95\)00035-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869(95)00035-5)
- Harvey, S., Cushion, C. J., Cope, E., & Muir, B. (2013). A season long investigation into coaching behaviours as a function of practice state: the case of three collegiate coaches. *Sports Coaching Review*, 2(1), 13–32.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2013.837238>
- Kim, J., Godfrey, M., Coleman, T., & Eys, M. (2024). Role dynamics in individual sport teams. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 13(4), 372–388.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000359>
- Lee, S., Kwon, S., & Ahn, J. (2021). The effect of modeling on self-efficacy and flow state of adolescent athletes through role models. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12:661557.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.661557>
- Light, R. L., & Harvey, S. (2015). Positive pedagogy for sport coaching. *Sport, Education and Society*, 22(2), 271–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2015.1015977>
- Lindsay, R., & Spittle, M. (2024). The adaptable coach – A critical review of the practical implications for traditional and constraints-led approaches in sport coaching. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 19(3), 1240–1254.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541241240853>
- Lyle, J. (2007). A review of the research evidence for the impact of coach education. *International Journal of Coaching Science*, 1(1), 19–36.
- Lyle, J., & Cushion, C. J. (2010). *Sports coaching: Professionalisation and practice*. Edinburgh, UK: Churchill Livingstone.
- Lyle, J., & Cushion, C. (2017). *Sport Coaching Concepts: A framework for coaching practice* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

- Mageau, G. A., & Vallerand, R. J. (2003). The coach–athlete relationship: A motivational model. *Journal of Sports Science*, 21(11), 883–904.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0264041031000140374>
- Martens, R., & Vealey, R. S. (2024). *Successful coaching* (5th ed.). Human Kinetics.
- Mesquita, I., Rosado, A., Januário, N., & Barroja, E. (2008). Athlete’s retention of a coach’s instruction before a judo competition. *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine*, 7(3), 402–407.
- Mouratidis, A., Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W., & Sideridis, G. (2008). The motivating role of positive feedback in sport and physical education: Evidence for a motivational model. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 30(2), 240–268.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.30.2.240>
- Nash, C., Sproule, J., & Horton, P. (2017). Continuing professional development for sport coaches: A road less travelled. *Sport in Society*, 20(12), 1902–1916.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2017.1232414>
- O’Connor, J., Alfrey, L., & Penney, D. (2022). Rethinking the classification of games and sports in physical education: a response to changes in sport and participation. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 29(3), 315–328.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2022.2061938>
- Oliveira, S., Cunha, M., Rosado, A., Mexia, M., Manuel, J., & Ferreira, C. (2022). How to measure compassion in coaches? The validation of a new scale to assess the compassion coaches’ experience towards their athletes. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 22(3), 572–588.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2022.2161001>
- Otte, F. W., Davids, K., Millar, S. K., & Klatt, S. (2020). When and how to provide feedback and instructions to athletes?—How sport psychology and pedagogy insights can

- improve coaching interventions to enhance self-regulation in training. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1444. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01444>
- Quick, S., & Baghurst, T. (2025). “You coach coaches?” A rationale for the coach developer role and practical guidelines for effective working relationships with coaches. *Quest*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2025.2494505>
- Quick, S., Lyle, J., & Baghurst, T. (2025a). A case for thinking about thinking in sports coaching: Understanding situated cognition as a means to inform coaching practice. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2024-0102>
- Quick, S., Taylor, T., & Baghurst, T. (2025b). What are you thinking when you coach? An exploration of tennis coaches’ cognitions using stimulated recall. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541251391779>
- Quick, S., Baghurst, T., & Lyle, J. (2025c). The Hidden Struggles of Elite Coaching: How Coaches (Don’t) Balance Athlete Welfare with the Pressure to Perform. *Quest*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2025.2608612>
- Quick, S., & Lyle, J. (2024). An in situ exploration of practicing rugby coaches’ cognitions, higher psychological functions, and actions using think aloud protocol. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 43(4), 717–726. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2022-0285>
- Rai, N., & Thapa, B. (2015). A study on purposive sampling method in research. *Kathmandu School of Law*, 5, 8–15.
- Rylander, P. (2016). Coaches’ bases of power and coaching effectiveness in team sports. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 3(2), 128–144. <https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2015-0046>

- Ryou, J., Choi, E., & Lee, O. (2025). Pedagogical touch: Exploring the micro-realities of coach–athlete sensory interactions in high-performance sports. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 30(1), 92–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2023.2185600>
- Silva, L. M., Neiva, H. P., Marques, M. C., Izquierdo, M., & Marinho, D. A. (2018). Effects of warm-up, post-warmup, and re-warm-up strategies on explosive efforts in team sports: A systematic review. *Sports Medicine*, 48(10), 2285–2299. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-018-0958-5>
- Stein, M., Janetzko, H., Lamprecht, A., Breitzkreutz, T., Zimmermann, P., Goldlücke, B., Schreck, T., Andrienko, G., Grossniklaus, M., & Keim, D. A. (2017). Bring it to the pitch: Combining video and movement data to enhance team sport analysis. *IEEE Transactions on Visualization and Computer Graphics*, 24(1), 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TVCG.2017.2745181>
- Stodter, A., & Cushion, C. J. (2019). Evidencing the impact of coaches' learning: Changes in coaching knowledge and practice over time. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 37(18), 2086–2093. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0264041.2019.1621045>
- Sun, Y., Hsieh, J., Gao, X. (2025). Integrating qualitative comparative analysis with reflexive thematic analysis in theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251318749>
- Uskova, S. M., Prus, N. M., Krivenda, V. S., & Zhuravlyov, S. O. (2023). Development of physical qualities of students by means of athletics. *Scientific Journal of the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University*, 2(160), 33–35. [https://doi.org/10.31392/NPU-nc.series15.2023.02\(160\)](https://doi.org/10.31392/NPU-nc.series15.2023.02(160))
- Veljkovic, A. A., Djurovic, D., Dimic, I., Mujanovic, R., & Markovic, K. Z. (2016). College athletes' perceptions of coaching behaviours: Differences between individual and

team sports. *Baltic Journal of Sport and Health Sciences*, 2(101), 61–71.

<https://doi.org/10.33607/bjshs.v2i101.57>

Whitehead, S., Weakley, J., Cormack, S., Alfano, H., Kerss, J., Mooney, M., & Jones, B.

(2021). The applied sports science and medicine of netball: A systematic scoping

review. *Sports Medicine*, 1(8), 1715–1731. [https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-021-](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-021-01461-6)

[01461-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-021-01461-6)

Zeng, H. Z., Leung, R. W., Bian, W., & Liu, W. (2009). The differences in coaching behaviors

between individual and team sports at college varsity level. *Asian Journal of Physical*

Education & Recreation, 15(2), 35–42. <https://doi.org/10.24112/ajper.151776>

Table 1: A Comparative Thematic Analysis of Coaches' Behaviours in Three Contrasting Sports

Coaching Behaviours	Netball	Athletics	Tennis
Modeling	Consider who needs to demonstrate. Use of external analysis for in-depth feedback. Consideration of the type of skill that needs to be modelled.	Prioritization of individual athlete development. Scarcity of resources. More attention given to analysis of skill development.	Learning through visual elements and a coach demonstration. Explaining consequences through analysis and action.
Physical maneuvering	Consent is a key factor. Difficulties vary based on type of skill.	Consent is <i>the</i> key factor. Requires other people watching.	Consent is a key factor. Used for instructional strategies, less physical contact.

Sporting Characteristics and Coaching Practice

Feedback	Careful consideration of instruction.	Coaching approach can be tailored.	Coaching approach can be tailored.
	Getting peer-to-peer feedback is useful.	Importance of environment and cues can be focused more readily. Silence can be used to motivate.	Timing and distribution of feedback cannot be given when players play points.
Questioning	More challenging to know when to intervene.	Can be overly intense if not managed appropriately.	Natural stoppages.
	More environmental constraints. Identify which players need to be asked the question to develop critical thinking.	Can provide greater assessment of learning and critical thinking.	Can ask for reflection immediately. Critical thinking in between games.