

# Power in the Coach-Athlete Relationship

## Introduction

The coach-athlete relationship is indeed a complex one. It raises a number of questions such as "Who holds the power in the coach-athlete relationship? What kinds of power are evident? Why do those who are subject to power allow themselves to be so subjected? and what, if any, are the ethical implications upon those holding power in the coach-athlete relationship?"

Power is present in all social relationships and possessed by all individuals and social groups, arising out of their connections to each other (Gruneau, 1993). It reflects the ability to influence others to further interests and/or to resist the activities of others (Atlee and Atlee, 1992). Lyle (2002) notes the coach-athlete relationship is no exception and the exercise of power is an internal social issue. This discussion aims to present an objective evaluation as to reasons why, what, how and when power is used in the coach-athlete relationship.

## Reasoning for Power in Coaching

The exercise of power by coaches takes place within the realms of institutional boundaries and is evidenced in decisions about selection and recruitment (Lyle, 2002). Coaches should choose athletes according to preset selection criteria rather than on the basis of how the coach is feeling that day. The usurpation of power has implications for coaches' accountability as their decisions and role is subject to strong praise or strong criticism. A responsible coach must understand and be prepared to handle such criticism as their actions or decisions may be perceived negatively by those affected.

Ideally, the coach should wish to create a favourable environment to impart and use their knowledge. According to Fiedler's Contingency Model of Leadership (1973), the favourableness of a situation is defined in part by the leader's positional power. This invested positional power in leadership is influenced by their level of control over sanctions. If favourableness is affected by positional power, it is suggested that power will influence success. This influence is known as 'power in action' (Smith, No Date). In theory, the greater the power-position of the coach, the greater the emphasis the coach may have in the coach-athlete relationship (Chelladurai and Kuga, 1996; Fiedler, 1973). The use of power is often used by the coach in their methods to impart invaluable knowledge to improve and better team or individual performance.

## Evident types of Power

French and Raven (1968) consider there to be a six tier model of social power.

1. Legitimate power
2. Expert
3. Reward
4. Coercive

5. Nutrient
6. Referent

Coercive power involves the ability to force an athlete to do something against their will often punishing them for incompletion (Slack, 1997; Laios et al, 2003). This form is rarely used on its own by the coach as it involves an abuse of power and is considered to be dysfunctional (Slack, 1997). However, other forms of power can be used in coercive ways, such as when a reward or expertise is withheld or referent power is used to threaten social exclusion. One word from the coach could alienate the athlete from others in the group.

Reward power is the ability to give the athlete what they want in exchange for what the coach wants. From a coaching perspective, a coach may offer an athlete to finish the session early if he or she performs exceptionally well during a session. Anything an athlete finds desirable can be a reward, from a million dollar yacht to a pat on the back. Conversely, the denying of a reward can be used to punish athletes.

Legitimate power is that which is invested in a role (Potrac et al, 2002). The legitimacy of power may come from a higher power, often one with coercive power, for example the employment of a coach by a club executive. The fact that an athlete considers a coach to be 'king' allows legitimate power. It is important to remember that it is the position and not the person that holds legitimate power (Clifford and Feezell, 1997)

Referent power arises from athletes aspiring to be like their coach (Tauber et al 1985 cited by Potrac et, 2002). Often the power is wielded by celebrity coach or ex-professional athletes, e.g. Linford Christie.

Expert power involves the application of knowledge from experiences and education of the coach (Slack, 1997). Coach education programs contribute to the wealth of knowledge that a coach should possess for presentation to the athlete. Nutrient power involves the restriction and trickle-feed of the coaches' resources that they possess of knowledge that is required by the athlete.

### **Athlete Subjection to Power**

Why do those who are subject to power allow themselves to be so subjected? Power legitimately goes with any position requiring expertise and involving the authority to make decisions. A coach's legitimate power is based on the experience, education, and knowledge brought to the job (Kinsman, 1999). An athlete puts trust, which in turn allows power over themselves in the coach to bring out their best performance.

Coaching is proposed to foster more favourable leader-member relations than that of teachers due to small sized athletic teams, lengthened contact between the coach and athlete, and voluntary participation (Chelladurai and Kuga, 1996). If the coach and the athlete have a high degree of trust and respect then it will be easier for the coach to exert influence (Fiedler, 1973). As a result the communication of ideas and strategy may become more efficient. With the realisation of

efficiency the athlete may assume that adhering to the coach brings them closer to their desired goals. McClelland (1966) proposed that individuals are influenced by their need for achievement, to be productive, reaching desirable goals and affiliation of positive relationships. Slack (1997) implied that people developed bias towards such needs. In an effort to catalyze such achievement and encourage relationships, it could therefore be suggested that athletes immerse themselves under coach's power to motivate and pursue direction and correction to achieve their goals. How do coaches gain power?

It is important to initially understand the attainment of power. There are two main theories to the acquiring of power. A structuralist approach to social role theory indicates that as a coach steps into the role, the coach immediately assumes power out of athlete respect for the position (Potrac et al, 2002). Conversely, an interactionist view describes an approach where the coach is involved in 'role making' (Callero, 1994; Raffel, 1998 cited by Potrac et al, 2002). Their actions and performance acquire power. It could be suggested that coaches may inherit some 'structuralist' power and acquire more 'interactionist' power during time in the role.

Potrac et al (2002) inadvertently describes a coach gaining respect and power through the demonstration of certain skills (expert and referent power), previous job experience (expert and referent power), previous experience as an athlete (expert and referent power), his instruction (nutrient power), control (coercive and reward power), organisation (legitimate power) and accountability (legitimate power).

### How do coaches use their Power?

Coaches can use power both negatively and positively (Dodge and Roberston, 2004). Potrac et al (2002) found coaches were positive on the ratio of 33:1. This suggests that through time coaches have found negative use of power to have less or a detrimental on athlete performance.

A prime example of how a coach uses power is evident in the insertion of new exercise into a current training program. A coach could use solely legitimate power to encourage athletes to try new exercises, since the role of the coach demands respect. This could be followed and enforced by a rewarding (reward power) the athlete with a shorter session. Alternatively the athlete could be forced to partake or face a punishment of 50 press-ups. The coach could tell the athlete that these exercises were what made him/her a world champion (referent power) and inform them of previous successes of other athletes who use the same method (expert). A negative use of power could involve making one particular athlete of the whole team clear up after other group members. 'The challenge to the coach is to recognize the power and learn how to use it rationally with discretion.' Kinsman (1999)

### Who holds the power in the coach-athlete relationship?

The coach is often thought to be the holder of power, as assumed by their use of many types of power (French and Raven, 1968). As previously mentioned the coach uses power in varying different ways. However, Tauber (1985) cited by Potrac et al (2002) '...power is something in the hands of the person on whom power is being wielded, not in the hands of the presumed

power wielder'. So although the coach is using power, according to Tauber (1985) he/she does not necessarily possess it. Furthermore, it could be suggested that the athletes are exerting their own power by allowing the coach to exert power. Tauber (1985) cited by Potrac et al (2002) notes that '...people [athletes] ... must consent to power being used on them before such power can be effective'. Potrac et al (2002) also cites Nyberg (1981) who describes this phenomenon as 'power over power'.

Potrac et al (2002) proposes that coaches create a character, image or front to allow athletes to consent to the use of power over them. Crucially, athletes have the ultimate sanction of walking away from the training environment and often undermining the use power of coaches.

### Consequences to the use of power

There are of course legacies to the coaches' use of power. Dodge and Robertson (2004) recommend that coaches' should recognize the power inherent in the position of coach and the influence over athletes they can have as this can be both positive and negative. Kinsman (1999) states vulnerability is the downside of power. In the power position as coach, a coach's actions and decisions may affect athletes, other coaches, the athlete's family and friends (Kinsman, 1999). For example an abuse of power towards a child may give the club a bad reputation with prospective coaches and athletes. The coaches actions may have been in good faith but misinterpreted and lead to the impression of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, or to false accusations. A coach must take an objective, reflective view of a situation as an abuse of power maybe considered during an action such as massaging an athlete in a hotel room. Although considered correct and necessary by the coach it may be interpreted as an inappropriate abuse of power, inferred by outside sources.

### The ethical implications upon those holding power in the coach-athlete relationship

Many coaches have a great deal of power over their athletes (Blackhurst et al., 1991; Burke, 2001; Clifford and Fezell, 1997; Laios, Theodorakis and Gargalianos, 2003; Sherman, Fuller and Speed, 2000). If the ethical standards of a coach remain low then athletes may be caught in a situation where they feel they must do what the coach suggests (Lyle, 2002). As a result, Blackhurst et al. (1991) and Eitzen (1988) conclude the just justification for cheating is directly influenced by the coach.

Dodge and Roberston (2004) conducted a study (n=91) to investigate athlete justification for unethical behaviour in sport with particular emphasis on the role of the coach. They noted that athletes thought that bending the rules may be justifiable if the coach suggested it. Twelve per cent of males indicated that they could justify the use of performance enhancing drugs if the coach were to suggest it. Dodge and Roberston (2004) note that '...the consequences, perceived as being controlled by another, indicate that blame or responsibility is shifted from the athlete to the coach.'

Many legal cases have arisen from what the Centre for Sport and Law describes as '*abuses of*

*power*' (Centre for Sport and Law Inc., 2005). Coaches are considered to be a position of trust where an obligation is placed upon the coach that is not placed on a normal person in society. The depth of legal suits is a vivid reminder of the potential abuse of power that coaches can inflict intentionally or unintentionally in the athlete relationship. It invariably reiterates the need to educate coaches, understand and exercise this power with the utmost care.

### Summary

*'There is no doubt that performance sports coaching involves a complex set of power relationships and that this gives a potential for a reconceptualisation of coaching styles and interpersonal relationships.'* Lyle (2002) Pocwardowski et al (2002) conclude that athletes change because of the influence of their coaches. Additionally, Dodge and Roberston (2004) note coaches have a great deal of perceived power and are able to greatly influence the lives of athletes. Kinsman (1999) suggests building good relationships to ensure athletes understand a coach's methods and motivations and can better accept difficult decisions. He also advises coaches to heed any warning signals and, if concerned, to keep good records.

The wider acceptance of alternative learning methods from the evolution of coach has led to edging away from authoritarian models making way for a new generation of athletes who question coaches far more than was acceptable in the past and a greater need to understand and accept what they are doing (Kinsman, 1999). The use of power is therefore a necessary tool in the right hands of the good coach. Essentially, the athlete holds the power as they may take the ultimate sanction and walk away from the training environment. It is the athlete who consents to the use of power over themselves. A coach should be in control, not over control, while recognising that the coach athlete relationship is a partnership (Smith, No Date). Therefore the use of power should be scrutinised closely within coach education programs and workshops.

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