

## REVIEW ARTICLE

## Perception of conflict between athletes and coaches: A systematic review

Semir Mašić<sup>1</sup>, Denis Čaušević<sup>1</sup>, Ivor Doder<sup>1</sup>, Amila Hodžić<sup>1</sup>, Munir Talović<sup>1</sup>, Almir Mašala<sup>1</sup>, Adis Tabaković<sup>1</sup>

*Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

**Abstract.** Conflict is an integral part of sport, and it implies a normal occurrence in communication and relationship between athletes and coaches. The main aim of this paper was to present a conflict analysis of the coach-athletes relationship, but also its impact on the achievement of sports results. The review article analysed nine works that directly studied interpersonal relationships between coaches and athletes. Research results suggest that conflict is evident and inevitable, as well as expected since coaches spend a lot of time with athletes, and pass through the training process, but also the competition period, when athletes are exposed to greater pressure because of the competition itself. Timely response and adequate response to conflict can greatly contribute to improving relations and even better sports results.

**Keywords.** 3CS, management, manager, sport.

### Introduction

In high-level sports where the stakes are high and outcomes are unpredictable, effective communication and appropriate behaviour can become challenging and lead to conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). Conflict represents a situation where two or more parties have different objectives or interests in relation to those of others, so they want to "impose" their view or even a solution to a particular problem. Probably the most important interaction in the field of sport is the one created between coaches and athletes (Jowett, 2003), while the relationship itself lies in the "heart" of sports training, but also successful training (Jowett & Carter, 2006). Conflict does not necessarily mean something negative, but it can simply represent a difference in opinion and may arise at any organizational level. Conflict is in modern society mostly viewed as a normal and inevitable phenomenon, although some organizations still consider it a negative phenomenon.

The causes of conflict are numerous and diverse, and mainly concern the existence of at least two parties

(they might be individuals or groups), while the cause is most commonly the opposite interest of the conflicting parties. Wachsmuth et al. (2017) define an interpersonal conflict in sport as a situation where certain parties notice a disagreement on values, needs, opinions or objectives, manifesting through negative cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions. Considering that athletes are today exposed to major efforts and stressful situations, conflict often occurs between athletes and their trainers, or athletes and judges, but also between athletes themselves. Since athletes spend most of their time with their coaches, conflict is part of their relationship, and it is thought that it can affect the quality of training, the acquisition of new knowledge at training, and even affect the level of mental preparedness of athletes for competition. Sports psychology paid considerable attention to understanding the interaction between coaches and athletes through theoretical models which include the leadership of coaches and athletes (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980; Fransen et al., 2014), the behaviour of the coaches (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Smoll & Smith,

✉ S. Mašić, e-mail: semir.masic@fasto.unsa.ba

Received: April 30, 2021 - Accepted: June 03, 2021 - Published: June 30, 2021

**To Cite:** Mašić, S., Čaušević, D., Doder, I., Hodžić, A., Talović, M., Mašala, A., Tabaković, A. (2021). Perception of conflict between athletes and coaches: A systematic review. *Turk J Kinesiol*, 7(2), 80-86. DOI: 10.31459/turkjkin.930234

1989), coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Felton, 2014), the strategies of communication/relationships (Rhind & Jowett, 2010), collective efficiency (Short et al., 1985) and team cohesion (Carron et al., 1985) (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). According to LaVoi (2007), an increasing interest in interpersonal relations in sport, as well as the increasing appreciation of trusted, supportable and close interpersonal relations for well-being of athletes and coaches, emphasizes the need to extend the examination of the interpersonal dimension of coach-athlete relations, given that almost all human motivation and development theories contain some kind of process where people seek to establish and maintain a satisfactory relationship, because quality relationships make it easier and "bring" a series of positive results in almost every aspect of human development. Stokvis (2000) states that globalisation and the commercialisation of sport are linked to conflicts between club and national coaches and the athletes they train. The author further states that intense emotions are always involved in these conflicts, considering that both the effort of the athletes and their coaches are needed for staying at the highest level of sport. On the other hand, Holt et al. (2012) state that the conflict related to practice, competition or time spent in the game can sometimes be functional, because it reminds athletes that skills development and performance enhancement are essential for their development. According to the survey conducted by Jowett & Cramer (2010), the higher levels of self-perception in terms of skills development and overall performance are predicted by the significance which athletes give to the depth of their relationship with coaches, while lower levels of self-perception are predicted by conflicts between coaches and athletes. Generally, such results suggest the importance of a quality relationship which athletes should have with their coaches, especially since quality relationships are positively influencing the different dimensions of an athlete. Therefore, the aim is to improve key elements such as physical (skills, technique, fitness), social (communication, engagement) and psychological elements (mental skills) in order to improve performance and provide a sense of accomplishment

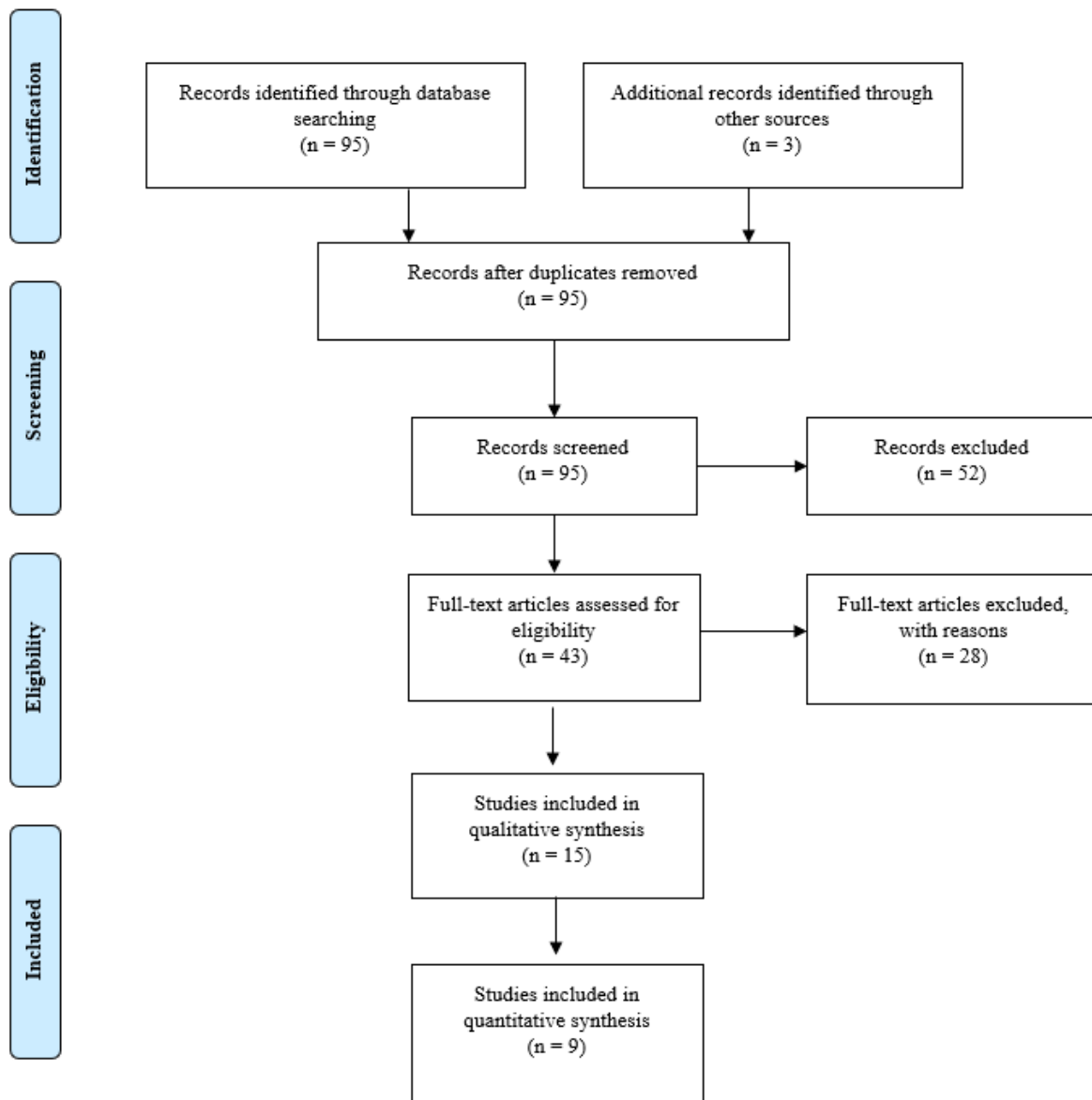
and excellence that both the coach and the athlete will experience (Jowett & Carpenter, 2015). The aim of this paper was to analyse the conflict between athletes and their coaches and its impact on the achievement of sports results.

## Methods

The work represents a systematic review carried out according to PRISMA methodology recommended by authors Moher et al. (2009). In order to obtain an existing research on conflict situations between coaches and athletes, the primary source of research was Google Scholar, Research gate and PubMed access bases. The studies analysed were published between 2009 and 2018. The following keywords were used while searching the databases: coach-athlete relationship, conflict, conflicts between coaches and athletes. After identifying the titles and summaries, the studies were read in detail and analysed on the basis of the criteria set. The criteria implied that studies concern an analysis of interpersonal relationships when it comes to sport, the conflict which arises between coaches and athletes and that these studies were written in English. The studies that met the criteria are presented based on the following parameters: References (initials of authors and year of publication), sample of respondents and results obtained during the survey (Figure 1).

## Results

The search of the above access databases found 95 studies that corresponded to the selected topic. 86 studies which were based on abstracts, duplicates and studies not written in English were eliminated. The final analysis included 9 studies (Olusoga et al., 2009; Rhind & Jowett, 2010; Mellalieu et al., 2013; Davis & Jowett, 2014; Paradis et al., 2014; Aşçi et al., 2015; Jowett & Carpenter, 2015; Wachsmuth et al., 2018; Wachsmuth et al., 2018) (Tables 1 and 2).



**Figure 1.** Diagram

## Discussion

The importance of understanding the conflict in sport is highly recognised because it has potentially serious implications for the outcomes of a group (LaVoi, 2007). Previous research has been mainly focused on positive, harmonious and stable relationships between coaches and athletes, that prevail in both training and competition, and all for the purpose of increasing trust and motivation for further work. However, it is evident that conflict exists within that relationship, and its

resolution is a priority. It is the study of conflict in the coach-athlete relationship that is important because it can affect the level of stress, confidence, motivation, and self-respect and achievement of results. Thus, the nature of the conflict, the situation which preceded the conflict, and the consequences of the aforementioned are to be addressed (Greenleaf et al. 2001; Poczwadowski et al. 2002).

**Table 1**

Overview of the studies included in research.

N	Title	Year	Authors	Journals
1	Stress in elite sports coaching: Identifying stressors	2009	Olusoga et al.	Journal of Applied Sport Psychology
2	Relationship maintenance strategies in the coach-athlete relationship: The development of the COMPASS model	2010	Rhind & Jowett	Journal of Applied Sport Psychology
3	A preliminary survey of interpersonal conflict at major games and championships	2013	Mellalieu et al.	The Sport Psychologist
4	Coach-athlete attachment and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship: implications for athlete's well-being	2014	Davis & Jowett	Journal of Sports Sciences
5	Athlete perceptions of intra-group conflict in sport teams	2014	Paradis et al.	Sport and Exercise Psychology Review
6	The role of personality characteristics of athletes in coach-athlete relationships	2015	Aşçi et al.	Perceptual and Motor Skills
7	The concept of rules in the coach-athlete relationship	2015	Jowett & Carpenter	Sports Coaching Review
8	On understanding the nature of interpersonal conflict between coaches and athletes	2018	Wachsmuth et al.	Journal of Sports Sciences
9	Managing conflict in coach-athlete relationships	2018	Wachsmuth et al.	Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology

**Table 2**

Overview of the obtained results of the studies analysed.

N	Authors	Aim	Conclusion
1	Olusoga et al., 2009	The purpose of the study was to get a detailed overview of the stressors that elite coaches in the United Kingdom face. Six male and six female trainers with international experience were included in the study.	The results showed a wide range of stressors such as conflict, pressure and expectations, athletes' concern, preparation for competition, isolation. However, the conflict in the organisation has emerged as a key topic, suggesting that communication skills may be important when it comes to helping coaches to function effectively as part of a broader organisational team. The results also stressed the importance of training the psychological skills for coaches to help them cope with different training requirements on a global scale.
2	Rhind & Jowett, 2010	This study aimed to investigate the perception of coaches and athletes on strategies they use to maintain quality relations. Twelve individual one-on-one interviews with coaches and athletes were performed and were structured based on factor 3 + 1C (closeness, dedication, complementarity and co-orientation) of the conceptualisation of coach-athlete relationship.	The deductive and inductive analysis of content has revealed seven main categories: Conflict management, openness, motivation, positivity, consultation, support and social networks. On the basis of this analysis, the COMPASS model was developed and was offered as a theoretical framework for understanding how coaches and athletes can maintain quality relationships.
3	Mellalieu et al., 2013	The aim of this study was to conduct a preliminary research of the experience of athletes from the United Kingdom, the management and support staff with interpersonal conflicts during major competitions. 90 participants who represented their nation in large contests filled in a detailed survey of interpersonal conflicts in relation to the competition.	The results suggest that athletes, coaches, and team managers are at the highest risk of interpersonal conflicts. The places where the competitions are held are also the places where the conflict mostly occurs. Also, interpersonal conflicts predominantly lead to negative cognitive and affective consequences.

Table 1 Continued

N	Authors	Aim	Conclusion
4	Davis & Jowett, 2014	This study examined whether the athlete-to-coach attachment styles were linked to aspects of the quality of the coach-athlete relationship and whether the quality of the relationship was related to the well-being of athletes. 192 athletes filled a questionnaire relating to their attachment styles and the quality of their relationship with the coach, as well as their feelings of positive and negative affect.	The authors stated that, probably, interpersonal conflicts play a key role in the positive and negative emotions of athletes. From a practical perspective, understanding of conflict management can provide a resource that enables athletes and coaches to improve the quality of their sports relations. Awareness of proactive and reactive strategies potentially lead the coaches and the athletes to "expand" their views and build relationships that will help them create positive emotions.
5	Paradis et al., 2014	This study investigated athletes' perceptions of intragroup conflict in sport. Ten intercollegiate athletes participated in semi-structured interviews.	The results showed that athletes understand the nature of conflict and that it manifests in several ways such as dissent, negative emotions and interference/antagonistic behaviour. In addition, episodes of conflict were considered to arise in certain tasks, as well as in some social backgrounds.
6	Aşçi et al., 2015	This study investigated the relationship between the athlete's personality and the quality of the relationship with the coach. 213 elite youth contestants participated in the study. All participants completed two questionnaires: Five-Factor Personality Inventory (short version) (FFPI; Somer, Korkmaz, & Tatar, 2002, 2004) and the Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI; Pierce et al., 1997). The study used a Turkish version of QRI which has 16 items.	Multiple regression analysis assessed which of the five personality factors predict results for the various subscales of the Quality of Relationships Inventory (depth, support, and conflict). The results showed that the depth of the relationship was not predicted by personality factors. On the other hand, neuroticism and extraversion were significant predictors of relationship support. The analysis showed that conscientiousness was the strongest predictor of conflict. The authors concluded that the personality traits of athletes may be important in determining the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.
7	Jowett & Carpenter, 2015	The main aim of this study was to explore the rules of the coach-athlete relationship. The study included 15 British athletes and 15 coaches.	The results showed that the rules, in general, relate to the conduct of a professional relationship, that is to say, mutual respect. The main characteristic of the relationship rules was to minimise interpersonal conflict through arguments and support. It has also been pointed out that the interpersonal dimensions defining the relationship between coaches and athletes serve as rules which increase support while reducing conflict.
8	Wachsmuth et al., 2018	The study explored the characteristics and themes of conflict, as well as the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural experiences of coaches and athletes during the conflict. A total of 22 independent coaches and athletes participated in semi-structured interviews that developed around the nature of interpersonal conflicts.	The results showed a variety of ways in which students understood and interpreted interpersonal conflict, and how their impressions of the conflict affected its evolutionary process. Taking into account cognitive, emotional, and behavioural terms of conflict with participants, it became evident that the conflict could be described through unsafe, escalating, and problem-oriented responses.
9	Wachsmuth et al., 2018	The study explored coach-athlete conflict and focused on conflict management approaches used to minimize dysfunction and maximize the functional outcomes of interpersonal conflicts. Twenty-two coaches and top athletes participated in semi-structured interviews.	The analysis revealed that coaches and athletes prevent conflicts by: a) providing quality relationships and optimal working environment (implicit conflict prevention); b) engaging into active conflict prevention strategies (explicit conflict prevention). It is also noted that athletes and coaches manage conflicts by using interpersonal strategies, but also seeking professional help. The authors concluded that the role of coaches was crucial to effective conflict management.

In an attempt to systematically explore the nature of the coach-athlete relationship, Jowett & Cockerill (2003) used interpersonal constructs of closeness, commitment, and complementarity (3CS model) to reflect the emotions, cognitions, and behaviours of

coaches and athletes. The study used these constructs to examine the nature of a typical coach-athlete relationship that "experiences" interpersonal conflicts. The analysis indicated a significant difference in the perception of coaches and athletes about their sports



relationships, areas of emotional isolation, disagreement, and incompatibility. As a general conclusion, the authors state that the relationship formed between the coach and the athlete is probably the most important interpersonal relationship in the sports domain. This is confirmed by the fact that top athletes view their coach, in most cases, as a close friend, and even as their father or mother.

This model was also used by the authors Jowett & Meek (2000a, 2000b) and Jowett & Pearce (2001). The results found that feelings such as respect, trust, commitment, and complementary behaviours are important aspects which positively affect sports relations. However, while there is still no convincing evidence to suggest that there is a causal link between the quality of the coach-athlete relationship and high achievements, when it comes to performance in a particular sport, there is some evidence to suggest that successful relationships may include positive interpersonal qualities such as trust, respect, commitment, and understanding (Hemery, 1986; Vernacchia et al. 2000; Greenleaf et al. 2001). On the other hand, negative feelings of closeness such as distance and disconnection, conflicting interests, different goals, and lack of understanding negatively affect sports relationships (Jowett, 2003). This is confirmed by the results of a study by Poczwadowski et al. (2002), who found that coaches and athletes in "negative relationships" experienced hurt feelings, lack of communication, commitment, and satisfaction.

Interpersonal conflict reflects a state of imbalance, mismatch, and incompatibility between members of a group (Hinde, 1997). Scanlan et al. (1991) defined interpersonal conflict as experiencing discord between oneself and others, and in their study stated that some skaters (figure skating) did not agree with their coaches because they did not like the personality or style of their coach. In another study, Greenleaf et al. (2001) found that experiences related to the conflict of elite coaches and athletes "evolved" around issues such as training as well as relations within the team. It is evident that the coach has one of the key roles when it comes to prevention, but also finding the best solution when it comes to conflict resolution. It is clear that the key factor is how and in what way to overcome the conflict, and it is recommended to define common interests and goals as the best way. Gender based conflict, regardless of whether it is about female or male athletes, as well as the different gender of coaches, is poorly explored because conflict is mostly observed in general. The authors of this paper are not

aware of any research that has dealt with this topic of conflict so far.

## Conclusion

Based on the above studies, it is clear that conflict exists and is inevitable, especially in relationships between coaches and athletes. However, this does not always mean that conflict is necessarily a negative phenomenon. On the contrary, it can lead to the improvement of the relationship, both between coaches and athletes, as well as between athletes and their club colleagues, other athletes, and may even challenge the improvement of sports performance. The conflict is very "ungrateful" to explore, for in the context of that relationship, it belongs to topics that are not talked about or are talked about very rarely. It is an area which is very difficult to explain, as it does not affect all individuals equally and people perceive and view conflict differently. In the light of the above, the authors' recommendations for future research represent the inclusion of different gender in the research and their impact on conflict development, both in teams and individual sports.

## References

- Aşçi, F. H., Kelecek, S., & Altıntaş, A. (2015). The role of personality characteristics of athletes in coach-athlete relationships. *Percept Mot Ski*, 121(2), 399-411.
- Carron, A. V., Widmeyer, W. N., & Brawley, L. R. (1985). The development of an instrument to assess cohesion in sport teams: The Group Environment Questionnaire. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 7(3), 244-266.
- Chelladurai, P., & Saleh, S. D. (1980). Dimensions of leader behavior in sports: Development of a leadership scale. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 2(1), 34-45.
- Davis, L., & Jowett, S. (2014). Coach-athlete attachment and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship: Implications for athlete's well-being. *J Sport Sci*, 32(15), 1454-1464.
- Fransen, K., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2014). The myth of the team captain as principal leader: Extending the athlete leadership classification within sport teams. *J Sport Sci*, 32(14), 1389-1397.
- Greenleaf, C., Gould, D., & Dieffenbach, K. (2001). Factors influencing Olympic performance: Interviews with Atlanta and Nagano US Olympians. *J Appl Sport Psychol*, 13(2), 154-184.

- Hemery, D. (1986). *The pursuit of sporting excellence: A study of sport's highest achievers*. Detroit, MI: Willow Books.
- Hinde, R. A. (1997). *Relationships: A dialectical perspective*. UK: Psychology Press.
- Holt, N. L., Knight, C. J., & Zukiwski, P. (2012). Female athletes' perceptions of teammate conflict in sport: Implications for sport psychology consultants. *Sport Psychol*, 26(1), 135-154.
- Jowett, S., & Meek, G. (2000a). *Coach – athlete relationships in married couples: An exploratory content analysis*. *Sport Psychol*, 14, 157-175.
- Jowett, S. (2003). *When the "honeymoon" is over: A case study of a coach-athlete dyad in crisis*. *Sport Psychol*, 17(4), 444-460.
- Jowett, S., & Carpenter, P. (2015). The concept of rules in the coach-athlete relationship. *Sports Coach Rev*, 4(1), 1-23.
- Jowett, S., & Clark-Carter, D. (2006). Perceptions of empathic accuracy and assumed similarity in the coach-athlete relationship. *Br J Soc Psychol*, 45(3), 617-637.
- Jowett, S., & Cockerill, I. M. (2003). Olympic medallists' perspective of the athlete-coach relationship. *Psychol Sport Exerc*, 4(4), 313-331.
- Jowett, S., & Cramer, D. (2010). The prediction of young athletes' physical self from perceptions of relationships with parents and coaches. *Psychol Sport Exerc*, 11(2), 140-147.
- Jowett, S., & Felton, L. (2014). Coach—Athlete relationships and attachment styles within sport teams. In M. R. Beauchamp & M. A. Eys (Eds.), *Group dynamics in exercise and sport psychology* (pp. 73–90). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Jowett, S., & Meek, G. (2000b). Outgrowing the "family" coach—athlete relationship: A case study. In B.A. Carlsson, U. Johnson, & F. Wetterstrand (Eds.), *Sport psychology conference in the new millennium: A Dynamic Research-Practice Perspective* (pp. 200-204). Halmstad: Halmstad University.
- Jowett, S., & Pearce, J. (2001). An exploration into the nature of the coach—athlete relationship in swimming. In *Proceedings of the 10th World Congress of Sport Psychology*, 3, 227-229.
- LaVoi, N. M. (2007). Expanding the interpersonal dimension: Closeness in the coach-athlete relationship. *Int J Sports Sci Coach*, 2(4), 497-512.
- Mageau, G. A., & Vallerand, R. J. (2003). The coach-athlete relationship: A motivational model. *J Sport Sci*, 21(11), 883-904.
- Mellalieu, S., Shearer, D. A., & Shearer, C. (2013). A preliminary survey of interpersonal conflict at major games and championships. *Sport Psychol*, 27(2), 120-129.
- Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., Altman, D. G., & Prisma Group. (2009). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: the PRISMA statement. *PLoS Medicine*, 6(7), e1000097.
- Olusoga, P., Butt, J., Hays, K., & Maynard, I. (2009). Stress in elite sports coaching: Identifying stressors. *J Appl Sport Psychol*, 21(4), 442-459.
- Paradis, K. F., Carron, A. V., & Martin, L. J. (2014). Athlete perceptions of intra-group conflict in sport teams. *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review*, 10(3), 4-18.
- Poczwardowski, A., Barott, J. E., & Henschen, K. P. (2002). The athlete and coach: Their relationship and its meaning. Results of an interpretive study. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 33(1), 116-140.
- Rhind, D. J., & Jowett, S. (2010). Relationship maintenance strategies in the coach-athlete relationship: The development of the COMPASS model. *J Appl Sport Psychol*, 22(1), 106-121.
- Scanlan, T. K., Stein, G. L., & Ravizza, K. (1991). An in-depth study of former elite figure skaters: III. Sources of stress. *J Sport Exerc Psychol*, 13(2), 103-120.
- Short, S. E., Sullivan, P., & Feltz, D. L. (2005). Development and preliminary validation of the collective efficacy questionnaire for sports. *Meas Phys Educ Exerc Sci*, 9(3), 181-202.
- Smoll, F. L., & Smith, R. E. (1989). Leadership behaviors in sport: a theoretical model and research paradigm 1. *J Appl Soc Psychol*, 19(18), 1522-1551.
- Stokvis, R. (2000). Globalization, commercialization and individualization: Conflicts and changes in elite athletics. *Culture, Sport Society*, 3(1), 22-34.
- Vernacchia, R. A., McGuire, R. T., Reardon, J. P., & Templin, D. P. (2000). Psychosocial characteristics of Olympic track and field athletes. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 31(1), 5-23.
- Wachsmuth, S., Jowett, S., & Harwood, C. G. (2017). Conflict among athletes and their coaches: what is the theory and research so far? *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 10(1), 84-107.
- Wachsmuth, S., Jowett, S., & Harwood, C. G. (2018). Managing conflict in coach—athlete relationships. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 7(4), 371.
- Wachsmuth, S., Jowett, S., & Harwood, C. G. (2018). On understanding the nature of interpersonal conflict between coaches and athletes. *J Sport Sci*, 36(17), 1955-1962.