

# Supportive interpersonal relationships: a key component to high-performance sport

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Social health determinants, including human social connections, are critical to sustain health and well-being<sup>1</sup> and are central to elite sporting performance. Athletes live in high-pressure environments, and supportive relationships with coaches, support staff and/or others are vital to both athletic performance and well-being. Our study of World, Olympic and Paralympic champions revealed that while interpersonal relationships are a key contributor to high performance, they are not easily prescribed.<sup>2</sup>

Quality relationships can induce positive physiological changes that improve adaptation to stress and enhance performance.<sup>3</sup> The ability of relationships to mitigate stressful experiences is highlighted by Coan *et al* who found that access to social resources altered physiological and neuronal responses to a threat or stress.<sup>3</sup> This study, which used functional MRI scans to document neuronal responses of women confronted with the threat of electrical shock, found that high-quality relationships reduced threat-related brain activation. This is consistent with research that suggests quality relationships attenuate physiological responses such as cardiovascular arousal, cortisol and glucocorticoid levels, reduce threat-related brain activity and enhance general health and longevity.<sup>14</sup>

## SOCIAL SCAFFOLDS SUPPORT ATHLETES

An athlete's progression and transition from novice to expert is greatly influenced by their social environment including peer interaction and culture.<sup>5</sup> Like the general population, athletes have innate needs when it comes to building relationships, and interpersonal relationships can shape developmental experiences and perspectives for either better or worse. The stress associated with the highs and

lows of competition, negative chance events (ie, injury, illness and so on), and the typical demands of high-performance sport (travel, funding, juggling a dual-career,<sup>6</sup> non-selection, self-perceived poor performance, losses, relegation and the impact of social media) can be alleviated by a strong social scaffold. In contrast, non-accidental violence and maltreatment in sport, which includes psychological (bullying, harassment and ostracism), sexual and physical violence, is more prevalent in elite athletes and can lead to a host of negative mental health and well-being outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

While fostering supportive interpersonal relationships within high-performance sport is important, it raises many questions such as:

How can young and emerging athletes be empowered to establish strong interpersonal relationships that foster stability, trust and confidence, and support their personal and athletic development?

How can athletes build and establish secure relationships when there may be power differentials or differing priorities between athletes and support staff such as coaches and administrators?

## HAVING A LAUGH

Facilitating positive relationships goes beyond the relationship with a coach and/or parent.<sup>2</sup> Our research shows that elite-level athletes exhibit strong autonomy and self-regulation and are highly selective regarding their support network. Interpersonal relationships that allow athletes to laugh and have time out from the pressures of the high-stakes competition were particularly valued and came in many forms including with friends and teammates or with experts such as masseurs, physiotherapists or coaches, who expand on a purely technical or professional relationship. Our findings revealed that high-performance athletes felt more supported by coaches who related to

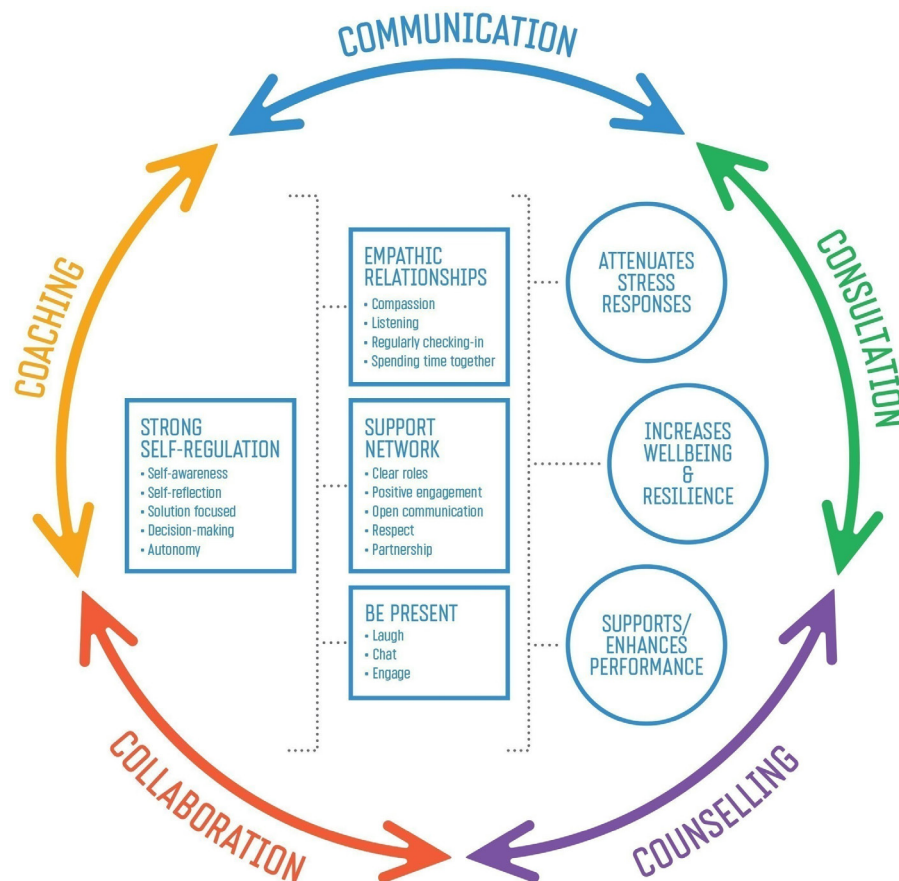


Figure 1 Strengthening interpersonal relationships in elite sport—a visual summary.

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## Box 1 Athlete representative quotes and summary of number of Olympic Games attended, along with gold medals won

## Representative Athletes Quotes

## KEY

A=able bodied; P=paralympic; T=team sport; I=individual sport; T/I=team & individual; F=female; M=male

## AIF 1

World titles x7

*I made sure that my friends at home did not surf. So I always had balance and the person I was on tour, I did not have to bring that home all the time.*

## Support

*It started with my dad giving me the freedom to go off and travel the world as a 17-year-old fresh out of high school. Dad also taught me the importance of making friends and asking for help and also adapting to change and the ability to sleep on couches.*

*My personal trainer invested his heart and soul into my professional development and then surrounding myself with world champions.*

*My surf coach who I started working with in the mid-nineties, in '95, who I still work with today. And then my partners, my boyfriends and my husband who are incredibly supportive and patient. My ex-partner mitigated a lot of my distractions and was able to identify several flaws in my technique that he made me work on daily.*

## AT/IM2

Olympic Games attended: Seoul 1988, Barcelona 1992, Atlanta 1996 – x1 Gold, Sydney 2000, Beijing 2008, London 2012

World Cup x5 Gold, World Championship x4 Gold

*The masseur was just as important as anyone in the team. You are favouring one side of your body all the time. My right side was built up far greater than my left all the time. I would have rather have had the sports masseur than the coach some days because the coach became a team manager and the sports masseur was a part of the team and a friendly guy. We always sent the coach—if I had to pick one, I would pick the massage therapist.*

## Coaches and cultural differences

*It was hard because the shooting team forever was changing coaches. The sports commission kept finding Russian coaches for us that have got no people skills. I mean, the Russian coaches that they gave us, they look at their clock and 5 o'clock you do not see them again. The coach that I had in my best years was an Italian guy and he was an Olympic medallist in his own right at the '84 Olympics and fully understood coaching does not stop until you go to bed at night, and because he had become a part of your life and you are talking about cars and boats and women, not just shooting.*

*It is sort of sad because the coach is not really a technical coach. He is nearly a part of your family, and then they become good coaches and they become a dual role of a coach and a manager. But I think at the top level, you do not need a technical coach. We have worked out what we need to do. It is what is going on in your brain will determine how you shoot. But a good coach that I found was someone that can sit with you at dinner and talk about something else other than what is about to happen the next day. And that is often all you need, distract you, just keep you calm, keep you calculated, give you confidence.*

*The high-performance manager we had at the Atlanta Olympics, I did not realise how good he was for our team until he had gone but he was a very calming influence with me. I remember talking to him the day before the Olympics—this was the high-performance manager, not the coach—and he just said, 'You are just doing things so well. You just look so good out there in that last training session'. Now, I do not even know if he saw me shoot. I have got no idea if he even saw but he went out of his way to come down out of the grandstand to say it and he got me believing, 'Yeah, you are right. I am doing it'. But the Russian coach, he would never do that. He would be on the bus back at the village and he would not be there to actually wait around till you put all your gear away. They are on the first bus out of there and they watch their clocks and its sort of sad.*

*I can honestly say that we never have eaten dinner once from 2008 until 2014 with the Russian coach, not a single team member, but every coach prior to that, that was nearly mandatory. He did not have to, but you wanted him to. And that is a really terrible thing to say, but he does not want to socialise with us.*

## AT/IM1

Olympic Games attended: Sydney 2000 x3 Gold, Athens 2004 x2 Gold

World Championships x11 Gold

## Support

*In the swim team at the time, we were all kind of like mates growing up and quite a few of us were jokers, so it was quite light, and in some of the harder times, it kind of broke what would be a stunned silence as well. And you know, we are not saving lives, so it should not be serious.*

## When asked about who provided support AT/IM1 responded:

*I did not really seek it. That was part of my problem. . . . I struggled to find someone that I felt was a peer that I could go to. So I struggled a bit with that during my career, but there were definitely people who supported me and assisted me whether it was my squad or my family, my coach, my friends, but no one knew everything that I was going through. I never would unload everything to one person in particular.*

Continued

## Box 1 Continued

**Parents**

*Mum helped me prepare home-cooked meals. She came around on a Monday and would make something that would last in the fridge in case I'm too tired to make something...also, your parents are supportive. It does not matter if you come home grumpy. They understand. All of those things I think help.*

**Coach**

*When I changed coaches, I started enjoying swimming again and I knew it was something that I actually cared about. By no means, you know, neither of my coaches were perfect coaches. They were not. But that was the right coach for me then. I needed more kind of support. I knew what to do in training. I just needed someone to support me through that. I did not really need a huge stick. It was more I needed the carrot to motivate me at that stage.*

**AIF4**

Olympic Games attended: Lillehammer 1994, Nagano 1998, Salt Lake City 2002, Torino 2006, Vancouver 2010  
World titles x9

**Coach**

*My coach for the last 3 years...he was not employed really as a technical coach because I was more successful than he ever was in his career as ex-athlete. He did not even have great technical knowledge but what he was—he was fun, and he was light. At this point in my career, I was getting older and had less energy. He was that funny, upbeat guy who made me laugh...we just laughed the whole way through the last 3 years, and I'm telling you I needed it. It was bloody terrible. He would sing songs, he was so funny. As bad as it was and what I was going through, he made it so enjoyable. I would be crying 1 min, and he would be there being so funny that it did not matter anymore. He was good fun.*

**Support**

*The talent scout who found me, if he came to a competition, I would not even stand next to the coach. I would go and stand next to him. It was like I felt if I just rubbed him I would feel better. I always stood next to him. Just standing next to him I felt so much confidence.*

**Family**

*My mum would either worry too much and say things on the phone that...just, 'Mom, why would you say that? I'm trying to compete'. Like, 'You know, darling, do you think that that leg will stay in? Do you think it might fall off on the end of the jump?' So I just did not call her that much. ...So she could be watching, hmm, I'm doing a triple twisting triple somersault, the highest degree of difficulty in the world, and she would say: 'Well, it is nice darling', and sometimes it annoyed me.*

**PI/TM1**

Paralympic Games attended: Atlanta 1996, Sydney 2000, Athens 2004  
World Championships, x 1 Gold

*I think my success came from absolutely loving what I was doing. I love being around like-minded people. Getting out of bed at 5 o'clock in the morning to go to the gym, that is hard work, but when you get there and you know other athletes are going to be there and you go, 'Oh yes, that is awesome'. Everyone brings that same energy and for me that is a massive driver. Being in a space where you want to be surrounded by like-minded people, anything can be achieved. And if you enjoy it, game on.*

When asked about having someone who made him laugh PI/TM1 responded:

*To be honest, in most teams, it was me. I think humour absolutely plays a part and I think that is why I enjoy that role, that responsibility because it allowed other people just to destress and not be focused on being so serious. I mean, we are not saving lives. We are not at a doctors' conference, not in the theatre. We are a playing sport. So yeah, I definitely think it is important. When I travelled, that was an incentive, to be around the group that was laughing. It just turned out that a lot of the time it was me. But just being around other people who shared a view that life is worth living.*

them in an empathetic way, for example, shared a meal or asked about their day, than coaches who merely communicated technical knowledge. In addition, while parental support was highly valued by some athletes, others preferred to limit parental contact, especially around big events (see box 1, AT/IM1 & AIF4).

An integrated approach including lifestyle, competition, training, tailored engaging education, along with a supportive social network is key to building a successful environment for athletes to flourish both on and off the field.<sup>1 6</sup> Our research found highly successful elite athletes considered

human connection and being able to be relaxed and be present with someone, or to have a laugh or a chat, was an important factor in their success<sup>2</sup> (see box 1). While the need for technical coaching expertise varies along the athlete pathway, the importance of strong interpersonal relationships remains paramount throughout the sporting journey. Therefore, while dedication to training practices and utilisation of sports science and sports medicine are integral to performance, there may be an undue emphasis on skill or expertise, when a more powerful interaction could be as simple as asking 'how are you?' These communication skills, however,

can be the catalyst for building supportive interpersonal relationships.

**CREATING A HIGH-PERFORMANCE CULTURE**

The ability of interpersonal relationships to attenuate stress responses<sup>3 4</sup> is critical to achieving sustained success in the elite sporting domain<sup>2</sup> (see figure 1). If we look at an athlete as a whole person, there is a fundamental duty of care to ensure that they are supported to become their best, most resilient self, both on and off the field. Athletes, therefore, need to be encouraged to seek interpersonal

support that evolves as they move along their development pathway. An effective support network requires a team of people who embrace a pro-active and collaborative approach to performance management and maintain a culture of integration and open communication. The support network also requires clear roles, responsibilities and strategies to manage high-pressure environments and respect the athlete's perspective, knowledge and wisdom. In addition to professional psychological services, the use of techniques such as motivational interviewing<sup>8</sup> and solution-oriented counselling offer a framework for all support staff (including masseurs, physiotherapists and other service providers) to develop collaborative, compassionate and professional relationships that support athlete autonomy.

### OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Common barriers to the creation of supportive networks may include a lack of integration, collaboration, alignment or supportive team culture.<sup>9</sup> Sporting organisations are in a key position to help overcome these barriers by ensuring effective interdisciplinary case management of athletes and positive values and culture. This may involve educating service providers on how they can build on their technical expertise and contribute to athlete well-being. Preceding this,

encouragement of self-regulatory strategies, personal wellness plans<sup>10</sup> and dedicated mental fortitude training<sup>6</sup> with emerging athletes and their coaches and parents can facilitate the long and stressful journey to the podium.

Creating supportive interpersonal relationships is not a passive process, but rather a dynamic interplay, which evolves and grows as the athlete moves along their development pathway. After all, athletes are not machines; they are human beings who strive to have healthy, socially engaging and rewarding relationships while also succeeding at their chosen sport.

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