

The effect of controlling coach behaviors on collegiate athlete' life skills

YUYA MARUO¹, CHISATO KURIBAYASHI², SHINJI MUTO³, YOSHIKO TAKAHASHI⁴, RISA KOJO⁵
^{1,2,3,4,5}Department of Physical Education, Tokyo Women's College of Physical Education, JAPAN

⁵Present address: Miyazaki Sangyo-keiei University, JAPAN

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Abstract:

The controlling coach behaviors exhibited in sports coaching, including verbal abuse and violence, are a problem that needs to be resolved in sports. While recent studies have focused on the positive impact of supportive coaching behaviors, there has been a growing recognition of the detrimental effects of controlling coach behaviors. Previous studies have suggested that coaches should adopt a multifaceted role, encompassing physical training, skill development, psychological support, and educational guidance. This study to examine the relationship between controlling coach behaviors and athletes' life skills. One hundred thirty-two participants were recruited. Participants completed paper-based questionnaires, including the Controlling Coach Behaviors Scale (CCBS) and the scale of required life skills for college athletes. We conducted structural equation modeling with the CCBS scores and each life skill factor. The results showed that controlling coach behaviors were related athletes' lower life skills, including intrinsic motivation, coping and interpersonal skills. Controlling coach behaviors may cause athletes to relinquish their autonomy and question their own values. Additionally, this could lead to athletes' lack of intention and purpose in actions and a state of apathy, potentially resulting in a negative attitude and etiquette during games and practice. The results of the present study are consistent with previous findings indicating that controlling coach behaviors leads to relinquished autonomy and decreased intrinsic motivation among athletes. The present findings provide further evidence that controlling coach behaviors not only hinder athletes' motivation but also inhibit the acquisition of essential life skills. Coaches should engage in continuous self-reflection and strive to develop the qualities of effective coaches.

Key Words: coaching, CCBS, life skills, sport, interpersonal skills

Introduction

Controlling coaching behaviors, including verbal abuse and violence, represent a significant problem within sports (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Nakazawa et al., 2021). These behaviors have been associated with decreased athlete motivation (Barcza-Renner et al., 2016; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Merkel, 2013) and increased risk of burnout (Barcza-Renner et al., 2016; Choi et al., 2020; Vealey et al., 1998). While recent studies have focused on the positive impact of supportive coaching behaviors (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Gillet et al., 2010; Merkel, 2013; Vella et al., 2013), there has been a growing recognition of the detrimental effects of controlling coach behaviors (Assor et al., 2005; Barcza-Renner et al., 2016; Bartholomew et al., 2010; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Carlsson & Lundqvist, 2016; Choi et al., 2020; Curran et al., 2014; Ramis et al., 2017).

Drawing upon self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), Bartholomew et al. (2010) developed the controlling coach behaviors scale (CCBS) to assess athletes' perceptions of controlling coaching behaviors. The CCBS comprises four subscales: controlling use of rewards, negative conditional regard, intimidation and excessive personal control. Controlling use of rewards refers to the use of words or objects as rewards for training and achieving superior performance. Negative conditional regard refers to losing interest in or lacking consideration for athletes when they exhibit undesirable behaviors or attitudes towards a coach. Intimidation refers to the use of punishment, threats, and humiliation to coerce or instill fear in athletes. Excessive personal control refers to the attempt to intervene in the personal life of an athlete. Previous studies have suggested that controlling behaviors can diminish intrinsic motivation (Barcza-Renner et al., 2016; Bartholomew et al., 2010; Matsumoto et al., 2023; Toyama et al., 2020) and enhance somatic anxiety (Ramis et al., 2017). The controlling coach behaviors may impede athletes' ability to set and achieve personal goals due to a lack of intrinsic motivation (Bartholomew et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In addition, coaching behaviors have been shown to influence coping strategies (Gucciardi et al., 2017; Lefever et al., 2024; Rice et al., 2016; Smith et al., 1995) and interpersonal skills (Pierce et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2018). Lefever et al. (2024) investigated the relationship among perceived controlling and supportive coaching style, competitive anxiety, and burnout. Their findings suggested that athletes who perceived their coaches as controlling exhibited significantly higher levels of competitive anxiety and burnout (Lefever et al., 2024). Gucciardi et al. (2017) demonstrated that mental toughness can buffer against the perceived negative

impact of controlling coaching behaviors, thereby facilitating performance maintenance. These findings suggest that athletes with lower coping and stress management skills might exhibit heightened perception to controlling coaching behaviors.

The aforementioned psychological factors are encompassed within the concept of life skills. Previous studies have demonstrated that a coach's behavior impacts the development of life skills (Gould & Carson, 2008; Gould et al., 2007; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Petitpas et al., 2004; Pierce et al., 2018; Smith & McManus, 2008; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014; Vella et al., 2013). Life skills are defined as “abilities or adaptive and positive behaviors that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (WHO, 1994). A substantial body of literature supports the association between sports participation and life skills development (Danish et al., 1993; Murakami et al., 2004; Papacharisis et al., 2005; Pierce et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2018; Shimamoto et al., 2013; Smith et al., 1995). For example, collegiate sport clubs provide a valuable context for fostering life skills, particularly due to the significant student involvement in club management (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Shimamoto et al., 2013). Shimamoto et al. (2013) developed a life skills scale for college athletes and reported 10 life skills factors: stress management, setting goals, thinking carefully, appreciating others, communicating, maintain etiquette and manners, always giving one's best effort, taking responsibility for one's own behaviour, being humble, and maintain physical health and wellbeing.

Life skills acquisition primarily occurs through two strategies (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). Direct teaching strategies involve the explicit instruction of life skills within the sporting context, such as adherence to rules, demonstration of sportsmanship, engagement in team-building activities, and goal setting (Gould & Carson, 2008). Integrating life skills development into coaching practices is also recommended (Pierce et al., 2018). On the one hand, transfer strategies are involved in non-sport setting (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). Previous studies have demonstrated that life skills facilitate athletes' adaptation to retirement (Pierce et al., 2018; Smith & McManus, 2008) and enhance their quality of life (Mohammadkhani & Hahtami, 2011). Smith and McManus (2008), in a systematic review of sports retirement literature, suggested that pre-retirement life skills development can mitigate the transitional challenges of post-sports life. Thus, the coach, as key figures in athletes' lives, can influence both athletic and life skills development. This suggests that coaches should adopt a multifaceted role, encompassing physical training, skill development, psychological support, and educational guidance (Jowett, 2017; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

This study aimed to examine the relationship between controlling coach behaviors and athletes' life skills. First, we hypothesized that controlling coach behaviors would negatively influence life skills (hypothesis 1). Given that controlling coach behaviors diminish intrinsic motivation (Bartholomew et al., 2010; Toyama et al., 2020), we expected a negative effect on setting goals, the ability to always give one's best effort, and taking responsibility for one's own behavior in life skill. Additionally, given the relationship between life skills and both coping (Lefever et al., 2024; Skinner et al., 2003; Smith et al., 1995) and interpersonal skills (Pierce et al., 2018), we predicted a negative effect on stress management and appreciating others, communicating, maintain etiquette and manners. Second, we investigated the mediating role of intrinsic motivation in the relationship between controlling coach behaviors and interpersonal skills (hypothesis 2).

Material & methods

Participants

142 female participants were recruited. Participants were engaged in sports club activities. Participants completed anonymous paper-based questionnaires. All participants gave written informed consent prior to the survey. The questionnaires took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Eleven participants did not complete questionnaires. The final sample comprised 132 participants ($Mage \pm SD = 20.0 \pm 1.2$ years). The average number of years of sport experience was 10.7 years ($SD \pm 3.4$). This study was approved by Local Ethics Committee (2023-43).

Questionnaire

Controlling Coach Behaviors Scale

We used the Japanese version of the Controlling Coach Behaviors Scale (CCBS) that Matsumoto et al. (2023) translated to the original version of Bartholomew et al. (2010). Previous studies have confirmed its validity and reliability (Matsumoto et al., 2023). The CCBS measures four domains temperament. The subscales for controlling use of rewards have four domains of temperament (e.g., “My coach tries to motivate me by promising to reward me if I do well.”). The subscales for negative conditional regard have four items (e.g., “My coach is less friendly with me if I don't make the effort to see things his/her way.”). The subscales for intimidation have four items (e.g., “My coach shouts at me in front of others to make me do certain things”). The subscales for excessive personal control have three items (e.g., “My coach tries to control what I do during my free time.”). Participants were asked to rate each item using a seven-point rating scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”).

The Scale of Required Life Skills for College Student Athletes

We used the Japanese version of the appraisal scale of required life skills for college student athletes (Shimamoto et al., 2013). Previous studies have confirmed its validity and reliability (Shimamoto et al., 2013). This scale measures ten domains of required life skills for college student athletes. The subscales for stress

management have four items. The subscales for setting goals have four items. The subscales for thinking carefully have four items. The subscales for appreciating others have four items. The subscales for communicating have four items.

The subscales for maintaining etiquette and manners have four items. The subscales for always giving one's best effort have four items. The subscales for taking responsibility for one's own behaviour have four items. The subscales for being humble have four items. The subscales for maintaining physical health and wellbeing have four items. Participants were asked to rate each item using a five-point rating scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree").

Data Analysis Strategy

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each measure. Two-step modelling was performed, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the measurement model and structural equation model (SEM) analysis to examine the research model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The SEMs were tested to examine the direct effect of controlling coach behaviors on intrinsic motivation and interpersonal skills (Model 1). In addition, The SEMs were tested to examine the mediation of intrinsic motivation on the relationship between controlling coach behaviors and interpersonal skills (Model 2). Model fit was compared to determine the best fit to the data. Model fit was assessed using a selection of fit indices, including: Normed Chi-square (CMIN/DF), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA),

Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). Values higher than .90 of CFI and TLI, values lower than .08 of RMSEA and SRMR represent an acceptable fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Mediation was assessed by examining indirect effects using a 95% BC CI. All statistical analyses were executed using JASP (0.19.3.0) for Windows (JASP Team, 2024).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for each variable and the correlations between CCBS scores and life skills scores.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for each variable and the correlations between CCBS scores and life skills scores.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Negative conditional regard	11.7	6.4	-												
2. Intimidation	8.5	5.5	.70**												
3. Controlling use of rewards	10.6	4.9	.32**	.44**											
4. Excessive personal control	8.8	4.9	.55**	.64**	.45**										
5. stress management	12.3	3.1	-0.01	-0.16	0.04	-0.08									
6. setting goals	10.1	3.1	-0.12	-.34**	-.21*	-.20*	0.14								
7. thinking carefully	12.1	2.1	-0.15	-0.18	0.07	-0.13	.21*	.46**							
8. appreciating others	14.6	1.8	-0.1	-0.12	-0.01	0.02	0.22	.24*	.37**						
9. communicating	12.7	2.3	-0.1	-0.1	0.02	0.04	0.29	0.19	.25*	.40**					
10. maintaining etiquette and manners	13.6	2.3	-0.08	-.28**	-0.17	-.17	.20*	.33**	.43**	.38**	.24*				
11. always giving one's best effort	12.5	2.3	-.25*	-.42**	-0.19	-.31**	.25*	.56**	.53**	.35**	0.15	.44**			
12. taking responsibility for one's own behavior	13	2	-.27*	-.30**	-0.04	-0.13	0.15	.38**	.64**	.50**	0.19	.44**	.63**		
13. being humble	12.3	1.9	-0.1	-0.1	-.20*	-0.17	0.05	0.19	.31**	.40**	-0.03	.57**	.41**	.43**	
14. maintaining physical health and wellbeing	10.4	2.6	0.01	-0.17	0.09	-0.01	0.11	.42**	.42**	.22*	0.05	0.21	.39**	.38**	.25*

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Measurement model

Following the procedures outlined by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the CFA was based on 12 indicators and 3 latent constructs. The fit indices for the measurement model, allowing the latent variables to freely correlate between them, provide an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 79.40$, $df = 51$, CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06).

Structural Equation Modelling

Figure 1 shows the results of structural equation modelling. Model 1 represented an unacceptable fit with the data ($\chi^2 = 162.02$, $df = 76$, CFI = .87, TLI = .84, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .07). Model 2 represented an acceptable fit with the data ($\chi^2 = 79.40$, $df = 51$, CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06). As presented in Figure 1, CCBS was significantly related to intrinsic motivation ($\beta = -.19$, $CI = -.33, -.09$; $p < .01$). CCBS was not related to interpersonal skills ($\beta = .03$, $CI = -.04, .13$; $p = .39$). The indirect effect of CCBS on the interpersonal skills through intrinsic motivation was significant ($\beta = -.12$; $CI = -.23, -.06$; $p = .01$).

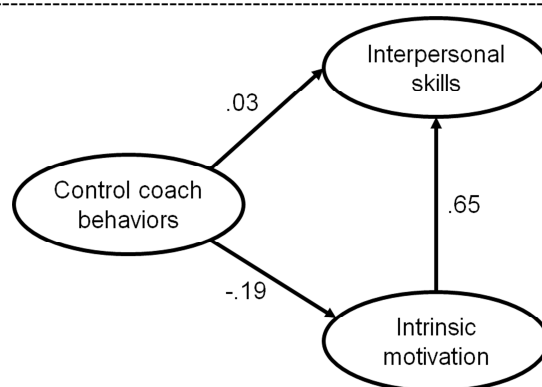


Figure 1. Diagrammatic presentation of Model including control coach behaviors, intrinsic motivation, and interpersonal skills.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the relationship between controlling coach behaviors and athletes' life skills. Participants completed anonymous paper-based questionnaires, including the CCBS and a scale assessing essential life skills for college athletes. The results of structural equation modeling indicated that controlling coach behaviors were associated with lower levels of athletes' life skills, including intrinsic motivation, coping and interpersonal skills. Previous research has demonstrated that controlling coaching styles can have detrimental effects on athletes' psychological well-being. For instance, studies have reported that athletes who experience intimidation and fear from their coaches tend to exhibit elevated levels of sports anxiety (Baker et al., 2000). Furthermore, controlling coach behaviors can undermine athletes' autonomy, leading them to question their personal values and relinquish perceived control (Barber, 2002; Bartholomew et al., 2010). A previous study specifically examining the impact of intimidation on athletes found that it significantly reduces intrinsic motivation (Toyama et al., 2020), a crucial factor for autonomous goal setting (Deci et al., 1999; Locke, 1996; Locke & Latham, 2006).

Controlling coach behaviors can lead to a decline in life skills related to intrinsic motivation. These findings are consistent with the current study's results. The lower scores in "always giving one's best effort" and "setting goals" indicate difficulties related to self-belief, persistence in personal efforts, and formulation of specific plans for achieving goals. Controlling coach behaviors may diminish athletes' autonomy and intrinsic motivation, hindering their capacity to engage in self-directed and meaningful actions (Deci et al., 1999; Locke, 1996; Locke & Latham, 2006; Toyama et al., 2020). Furthermore, controlling coach behaviors can negatively impact athletes' self-belief and sense of responsibility for their actions. By exerting excessive control, coaches may inadvertently discourage athletes from taking initiative and making independent decisions, ultimately hindering their personal growth and development.

This study also revealed an indirect effect of CCBS on interpersonal skills. Previous research has demonstrated that controlling coach behaviors can induce a state of apathy in athletes, characterized by a lack of intention and purpose in their actions (Gearity & Murray, 2011; Toyama et al., 2020). Our results might reflect similar findings. For example, intimidation from coaches can lead to a lack of intention and purpose in their actions, potentially contributing to negative attitudes and poor etiquette during games and practice, resulting in a decline in athletes' intrinsic motivation. An intimidating coaching style may create an environment where athletes prioritize avoiding punishment over genuine engagement and commitment, leading to a decline in team etiquette, manners, and overall discipline. Previous studies have highlighted the positive impact of humble coaching approaches on players and the team environment (Chandler et al., 2023; Huynh et al., 2020). Fostering a positive and respectful team environment is crucial for the coach and plays a significant role in enhancing team cohesion and athlete performance.

Considering that life skills facilitate athletes' adaptation to retirement (Pierce et al., 2018; Smith & McManus, 2008) and enhance quality of life (Mohammadkhani & Hahtami, 2011), controlling coach behaviors may influence their post-retirement lives. For example, maintaining etiquette and manners is crucial not only during competitions but also for ensuring effective communication in their post-sports careers. Therefore, the development of life skills should be included in training programs (Pierce et al., 2018), as it can contribute to increased well-being and life satisfaction (Mohammadkhani & Hahtami, 2011). Beyond improving technical skills and contributing to victories, coaches are expected to play an educational role in athletes' lives.

Various sports organization and federation (e.g., International Olympic Committee and the Japanese Society for Behavior Analysis) have issued statements opposing physical punishment (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Shimamune, 2015). Coaching intimidation continues to pose a significant problem in sports (Chandler et al., 2023; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Mountjoy et al., 2016; Nakazawa et al., 2021; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Previous studies have suggested that athletes promptly follow the instructions of coaches who employ intimidation, and

that coaches achieve immediate effectiveness through this approach (Nakazawa et al., 2021). From the perspective of motor learning, punishment has been demonstrated to be immediately effective in correcting athletes' behaviors following mistakes (Galea et al., 2015). Therefore, coaches must be mindful of the various aspects of their relationships with athletes. For example, is the relationship between players and coaches hierarchical? Does the coach need to produce immediate results within a limited period (the same applies to players)? Is the coach inadvertently inhibiting the athletes' spontaneity or initiative? Further studies are needed to restrain controlling coach behaviors such as intimidation. Greater emphasis should be placed on the development of coaches who adopt a player-centered approach (Bowles & O'Dwyer, 2020; Romar et al., 2016; Souza & Oslin, 2008). In the process of developing coaches, it will be necessary to place greater emphasis on the negative impact of controlling behaviors on athletes and to learn techniques that enhance not only athletes' athletic skills but also their life skills.

This study has several limitations. First, our results suggest that controlling coach behaviors contribute to lower life skills scores among athletes. However, the results may be limited due to the data being collected exclusively from female college students. Further research is necessary to examine potential sex differences. Second, this was a cross-sectional study. Conducting a longitudinal study would allow for a more detailed examination of the relationship between controlling coach behaviors and athletes' life skills.

Conclusions

The present study supported the hypothesis that controlling coach behaviors negatively impact athletes' ability to set goals, the ability to always give one's best effort, and taking responsibility for one's own behavior in life skill. The results of the present study are consistent with previous findings indicating that controlling coach behaviors leads to relinquished autonomy and decreased intrinsic motivation among athletes (Bartholomew et al., 2010; Toyama et al., 2020). Additionally, controlling coach behaviors indirectly contribute to a decline in manners and etiquette among athletes. The present findings provide further evidence that controlling coach behaviors not only hinder athletes' motivation but also inhibit the acquisition of essential life skills. Therefore, coaches should engage in continuous self-reflection and strive to develop the qualities of effective coaches.

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