

Coaches' perceptions of their work in an elite youth sport setting

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ABSTRACT

This study explored coaches' experience of working in a high-performance youth sport pathway program and their beliefs about coaching. This was a qualitative study utilising semi-structured interviews with 9 members of the coaching set-up. The data was analysed through an inductive thematic approach. Although research has suggested that the coach plays a critical role in skill development at the youth high-performance level, the coaches believed that their role extends beyond this to provide a positive overall experience that supports player retention. They believed that a crucial factor in whether youth athletes continue their sport participation is the coach-athlete relationship, and these coaches saw their work 'holistically' to develop good people as well as good players. While skill development and wellbeing of players was widely recognised and acknowledged by the coaches as part of their role, it was also established that there is little attention paid to the coaches' development and wellbeing in undertaking that role.

1. Introduction

In addition to the sport specific playing ability development, coaches in high-performance youth sport development contexts play an important role in players' lives and personal development (Stratchan, Côté & Deakin, 2011). The development of players may relate to the development of physical and sport specific movement skills as well as psychosocial learning experiences (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). Coaches are also influential and instrumental in shaping the welfare and optimal functioning of sport participants (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012). As such, high-performance youth sport has the potential to be a context for the promotion of positive youth development, professionally and personally when an environment is intentionally created for this purpose and when competencies are promoted in a deliberate and planned manner (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2014; Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2005). This study investigated coaches' experience of working in a youth squad high-performance pathway sport program in South Australia. The program nurtures a pathway to professional sport proposed through enhanced coaching and training, and by offering the opportunity for participation in competitions and national championship carnivals at a high-performance youth level. The youth squad program consisted of male and female squads, from Under 15 through to Under 19 age levels.

1.1. Why we need to understand coaches' perceptions of their work

Understanding coaches' perceptions of their work provides insights into the coaching behaviours they believe are constructive. What coaches emphasise and reward influences what is learnt, the emotions players attach to what is learnt, and the satisfaction players have with the coaching (Moen, Giske, & Høigaard, 2015). Performance outcomes, conduct at practice and 'game day', motivation, and emotional states are affected by the behaviour of a coach (Strachen et al., 2011). A coach's ability to create a positive coaching environment requires domain specific content knowledge about the sport (e.g., technical, tactical, strategic, biomechanical) and pedagogical knowledge about the learning process relevant to the players abilities and potential capabilities. Effective communication skills and the ability to establish a productive coach-athlete relationship are important (Moen et al., 2015). Extending the coach-athlete relationship to their wellbeing as a player and as a person is a characteristic of athlete-centred coaching (Pill, 2018).

Horn (2008) provided a model of coach effectiveness containing coach expectancies, values, beliefs, and goals as factors influencing coaching behaviour. Coaches' beliefs

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influence pedagogical decision making with the potential for idiosyncratic behaviour arising from the intuition of the coach about their everyday reality of coaching (Jones, 2006; Pill, SueSee, Rankin & Hewitt, 2022). The concepts upon which a coach maintains their representation of valued coaching behaviour influences what the coach intends to ‘do’ with their players (Cotê, 1998; Cotê, Salmela, & Russel, 1995). A coach’s behaviour reflects their values, which is a means to evaluate the experience (Moen et al., 2015) and explain why they do as they do (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009).

Previous research suggests that high level coaches perceive the working competencies of practice, that is the competencies developed from the experience of coaching and related to aspects of coaching in addition to player preparation, like relational development, as more important than other coaches (Mesquita, 2011). Preston, Allan, and Fraser-Thomas (2019) used the Com-B model elements: capability, opportunity, and motivation, to explore the experiences of high-performance youth hockey coaches. However, to date, there is limited consideration of the role of the coach and of coach development in high-performance youth sport settings and positive youth development. This research aimed to understand coaches’ experience of working in a high-performance pathway program of youth squads and what they believed was needed to support that role. The study was undertaken prior to a proposed introduction of an externally provided Coach Developer project, which did not occur due to Covid-19 restrictions. Studying these coaches’ (those who work in a high-performance youth sport setting) perceptions of their work is worthy due to the limited research in this area. This study formed part of a wider study into coach development in South Australia (Pill, Agnew, & Abery, 2021).

2. Methods

To elicit in-depth and meaningful representations and perceptions of experiences of coaching and the needs of coaching education and development in the context of a specific environment (Meyrick, 2006), a qualitative approach was utilised. Participants took part in semi-structured interviews. This study utilised an interpretivist paradigm in order to understand the meanings the participants attributed to their experiences (Poucher, Tamminen, Caron, & Sweet, 2020). Assuming that ‘reality exists in the form of multiple individual mental constructions about the world,

which are shaped through lived experiences’ (Poucher et al., 2020, p2. Supp file), this research adopts a relativist ontology and a subjectivist and transactional epistemology in that the knowledge is created through transactions between the participant and the researchers (Poucher et al., 2020). Institutional ethics approval for this research was granted by the research team’s institutional Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics approval number: 8375).

2.1. Participants and recruitment

In total nine participants (n = 9) volunteered to participate in interviews: the sporting body Coaching Development Specialist; the externally employed program facilitator and seven coaches. Participants were recruited via a convenience sample (Patton, 2002). Details of the sporting body Coaching Development Specialist and the externally employed program facilitator were known to the research team and with their assistance relevant coaching staff were identified. The research assistant (RA) followed up with all participants to arrange a time, location, or method of convenience to undertake face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted where possible at the sport’s high-performance facility (n = 8) or by phone at participants’ request (n = 1). The semi-structured interview guide was developed by the research team for the project, influenced by the dimensions explored in the Preston et al. (2019) study: capability, opportunity, and motivation. Interview length ranged from 45-60 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participant and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service.

Except for the externally employed program facilitator, all participants were employed by the sporting body on a full time or part time basis. The externally employed program facilitator was a former teacher, now an education consultant. Of the seven coaches who participated; five were male and two were female. Two of the seven coaches had participated in a ‘Coach Enhancement Program’ during the 2018/2019 season and were continuing in coaching roles in the 2019/2020 season. Three coach participants were Head Coaches and four were Assistant Coaches. As one coach interviewed was the Head Coach for two teams, eight teams across a range of player ages of the high-performance pathway program youth squads were represented (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of representation of coaches across age ranges and amount of time in the current role.

Coach	Team	Length of time in role
Head Coach	Under 17 Male	1 year
Head Coach	Under 15 Male	1 year
Head Coach	Under 18 Female	New to role 2019/2020
Head Coach	Under 15 Female	4 years
Assistant Coach	Under 17 Male	New to role 2019/2020
Assistant Coach	Under 15 Male	1 year
Assistant Coach	Under 18 Female	New to role 2019/2020
Assistant Coach	Under 15 Female	1 year

All participants had a background in playing the sport, coaching and/or coach education allowing for a range of perspectives to add depth and rigour to the findings (Patton, 2002). The sporting body Coaching Development Specialist was responsible for recruiting coaches for the youth pathway program, providing targeted coach education programs, accreditation, and mentoring, and to ensure consistency in coaching across the program. All participants had past or current experience in playing the sport at community, high-performance or professional level. Coach participants had a broad range of coaching experience. While some were new to the current coaching position ($n = 3$), the remaining coaches had been in the role for between 1-4 years prior to the 2019/2020 season (see Table 1) and continuing into 2019/2020 season when the study occurred. However, all coach participants had significant past coaching experience in the sport. Six of the seven coach participants held coaching accreditation through the National sporting body and one participant held an accreditation for the sport plus a post graduate degree in coaching undertaken internationally. Two coach participants had a teaching degree, and one was in the process of completing a teaching degree.

2.2. Data Analysis

A descriptive thematic analysis was undertaken to elicit key themes and perceptions of participants (Patton, 2002). To become immersed in the data and familiar with the content (Braun & Clark, 2006), the interview recordings were initially reviewed by the research assistant (RA) with the main points summarised. This was a process of semantic coding comprising labelling text using a concept-by-concept (as opposed to line-by-line) method to identify the explicit meanings of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006; Elliott et al., 2021). Subsequently and to provide triangulation of data (Patton, 2002), all researchers read, reviewed, and coded the interview transcriptions to develop themes and associated key points (Braun & Clark, 2006). Finally, consultation between the research team using peer debriefing to help the research team examine how their thoughts and ideas were evolving established agreement on themes (Nowell et al., 2017) through a process of optimisation through aggregation of themes and abandonment of themes where there became doubt on their analytic strength (Elliott et al., 2021). The analysis was thus inductive.

2.3. Rigour

Quality in this research project is aligned to the 8 criteria outlined by Tracy and Hinrichs (2017); worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence. Given there are no studies in South Australia that investigate the perceptions of coaches of their experiences in a high-performance sport setting, this topic is worthy through providing timely, and significant insight into coach's experiences. Data collection and analysis processes contribute to rich rigor through multiple researchers coding the data and through the use of theoretical constructs to analyse the data. The research process is transparent through the detailing of methodology and the self-reflection of the researchers to identify their values throughout the process. Credibility is established through the use of thick description which provides substantial

accounts and detail so that readers can come to their own conclusions about the information. Resonance is achieved through enabling readers to make connections between the findings and their own experiences. Through the in-depth contextual analysis, the findings can be considered in relation to other coaching situations thus leading to a better understanding of the phenomenon. This research offers a significant contribution through providing insight into the South Australian coaching context which has not been explored in this manner previously.

3. Results and Discussion

Participants in this study all influence coaching practice and subsequent coach and player experience. Through exploring their perceptions of coaching and the perceived work of coaches in this high-performance youth sport setting the findings from the study offer valuable data to support decision making for future coach development programs in high-performance sport pathway programs. Findings portray experiences of coaches in a specific setting and elicit some of the intricacies encompassed by the work undertaken by these coaches and are presented in themes that reflect: the role of coaches, coaching practice, and expectations for coach development with associated key points presented as sub themes.

3.1. Role of coaches

The coach plays a major role in the effectiveness of coaching practice (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Many characteristics and desired capabilities of the coach overlap within the role of coaching practice with a range of factors impacting the very broad scope that is the work of the coach. Some of the more specific work roles identified in this research relate to the responsibility of the coach to the player(s), relationships with parents and the perceived role in attrition and retention of players in the sport. Participants identified these roles as being associated with developing and supporting players as people as well as future professionals in the sport.

3.1.1. Responsibility of coach to the player(s)

The coach was seen to have a key responsibility in developing playing skills, building relationships with players, and fostering enjoyment of the game. If the coach can develop positive relationships with athletes, the learning experience for the athlete can be maximised (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Molinero et al., 2009). For example, 'if a coach can bring the best out in the player, they will achieve more and enjoy the game' (Assistant coach U17 male). If these responsibilities are enabled, it was believed that players will potentially develop respect for the coach and a passion for the game that will progress to retention in the sport even if they do not make it to the 'adult' high-performance level of the sport. This perception supports earlier work by Molinero et al. (2009) who found that both successful athletic careers and the termination of a career can be attributed to the relationship between the coach and athlete. Many of the perceived responsibilities and required capabilities the coaches discussed as beneficial to quality athlete-centred coaching fall outside of development of sport specific skills and techniques of

the game and what is needed at training and on game day and are more about developing their players as people and preparing them for the future. For example, one participant noted that coaching is ‘not based on winning; [but] did players improve, what was the experience?’ (Coaching Development Specialist). The perception that coaching is not about winning is contrary to the literature (Weinberg, 2000; Elliott & Drummond, 2011; Agnew, Pill, & Drummond, 2016). The Junior Sports Framework (Australian Sports Commission, 2014) advocates for safe, inclusive, and high-quality sport experiences for participants which aligns with a shift away from a focus on winning. However, previous research (Agnew et al., 2016) indicates that one of the elements that contributes to a positive sport experience for junior sport participants is success or the pursuit of success: children enjoy sport when they are winning. In addition, winning has been identified as a key motivator for participation in sports for children (Elliott & Drummond, 2011; Weinberg, 2000). Therefore, while coach development programs may promote coaching without a focus on winning, the environment in which the coaches operate may not facilitate such a perspective. Especially in the high-performance coaching context a coaches’ reputation can be measured on the success of the individual or team (Gervis & Dunn 2004; Pinheiro, Pimenta, Resenda, & Malcom, 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). This research was focussed on youth squads in a high-performance program which can be a feeder program to professional teams, thus demonstrating skills and winning are essential to proving one’s worth in being part of the program. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that a complete shift away from a focus on winning will occur. Instead, coaches are being required to consider additional responsibilities in a more holistic style of coaching to develop good people as well as athletes. Coaches’ experiences as coaches have changed due to a perceived shift in the culture of coaching which was acknowledged by several participants in the current research. Previous research (Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2011) has confirmed the shift towards a more holistic style of coaching that includes the development of life skills and was somewhat reflected by coaches in the current research. Coaches are now expected to develop more than just athletes - they are expected to play a significant role in the development of characteristics associated with being a good person which requires coaches to have skills outside of their coaching qualifications. This type of coaching is referred to as athlete-centred coaching for positive youth development (e.g., Pill, 2018). Positive youth development can be facilitated through providing training and support to coaches (Smoll et al., 2003); the importance of this concept is supported by the following participant comment: ‘doesn’t matter how many resources available if the quality of coaching and understanding of the player is not there’ (Assistant coach U18 female).

Observations provided by the participants in this research suggested that coaches had a responsibility to develop specific characteristics in their players to ‘support the learning process for players to achieve what they want to achieve, not just in sport but as a human being...promote transferable skills’ (Program facilitator). Transferable skills are life skills that are needed in everyday life and include social skills, communication, and leadership (Jones & Lavallee, 2009). Coaches need to be provided with opportunities to develop skills to incorporate more holistic practices into their coaching including how to transfer the skills

from the sporting context (Vella, Oates, & Crowe, 2011). This can include understanding the intentional use of coaching styles to meet player and task learning alignment (Pill et al., 2022). The characteristics the coaches identified as their responsibility for developing in their players in addition to skills specific to playing the sport are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Characteristics identified by coaches as targets in their coaching of the ‘whole’ person.

Characteristics
Resilience.
Creating players who can reflect on their skills themselves.
Empowerment.
Self-efficient and self-regulated.
Self-reflective.
Leadership.
Ability to cope with challenges.
Transferable skills and transferable knowledge.
Encourage players to question not just how but why.
Problem solving.

Coaches who had been ‘in the game’ for a while believed that coaching now was different to their previous experience. For example, comments included that the ‘culture of coaching has changed’ (Assistant coach U18 female), where coaches now seek to incorporate the development of intra and interpersonal characteristics into coaching practice and ‘if players have these skills, they can take them with them’ (Head coach U18 female) and ‘develop and grow as a person’ (Head coach U15 & U17 male) not just a player. Perceived responsibilities of coaches extended from developing a player to developing a person:

They help players with their learning processes, to be able to then achieve what they want to achieve. And that’s not just in sport, but as a general human being...transferable skills for their future... (Program facilitator).

Hassanin and Light (2014) found that prioritising the development of good people can create tension between a win at all cost approach to coaching and valuing the development of athletes’ desired characteristics. As previously mentioned, an integral part of being involved in a high-performance youth squad is success, particularly if participants have goals of achieving a professional contract. Therefore, it is not possible to discount the value of winning entirely. However, the development of characteristics that support the athletes in other areas of life should they not make it to the professional level may have broader benefits to sport participation.

3.1.2. *Relationship with parents*

The coaches believed that they have a responsibility to parents as well as players as this was a youth program. It was recognised that parents are part of the 'reality of junior sport' (Assistant coach U15 male) and play a significant role in the player experience 'positively and negatively' (Assistant coach U15 male). Coach participants identified that parents may be a challenge or an asset, either way there is the potential to place pressure on their coaching as dealing with parents is an additional time demand. In addition, if parents criticise coach decisions the youth athlete can experience heightened pressure and anxiety (Gould et al., 2008). It was considered vital that coaches develop a strong relationship with parents. Parent trust was considered important and as with players, it was considered imperative that coaching practice is transparent, with parents aware of the coach's role and player expectations. When there is a trusting and honest relationship between coaches and parents, the athlete's trust in the coach can be increased (Jowlett & Timson-Katchis, 2005; Knight & Holt, 2014). All coach participants had experience of parents attempting to influence coach decision making or placing pressure on players. Consequently, a common thought was that the coach must have strong communication and negotiation skills and management of parent involvement. In addition, the coach must be confident in their capacity to justify their actions with players to parents when challenged. Participants also acknowledged that parental satisfaction with coaches and in coach practice had the potential to influence retention in the high-performance program and the sport generally.

3.1.3. *Attrition and retention*

The coach-athlete relationship is a critical factor in whether young athletes continue their sport participation (Agnew et al., 2016; Wekesser, Harris, Langdon, & Wilson, 2021). The role of the coach in attrition and retention rates was raised by coaches during the interviews. However, the role of the coach in attrition rates in a high-performance pathway program, was not considered by participants to be of significant concern as player entry to the high-performance program was competitive and believed to be highly sought after. The coaches believed that players come to the high-performance program with a passion for the sport and desire to play at a high level. Retention in the high-performance program was therefore mostly seen to be based on talent. Given the athlete is rewarded for their talent (Claringbould, Knoppers, & Jacobs, 2015) by being selected into a specialised training squad, attrition may be lower than in other sport settings. However, as summarised by one participant, 'the reality of high-performance is not all will make it' (Assistant coach U17 male) and the pressures associated with performance expectations at the high-performance level can have a detrimental effect on athletes (Preston & Fraser-Thomas, 2014). As noted in participants' responses, the coaches had a strong belief that their role included developing good people as well as good athletes. This belief fosters a holistic style of coaching that can have a positive influence on the development of athletes. Therefore, along with their being selected based on talent, the holistic style of coaching which is athlete-centred may facilitate continued involvement by athletes.

The experiences of coaches in this high-performance program may differ from other youth sport settings as motivation may be higher amongst the high-performance athletes making attrition less of an issue. Retention is a key component of a coaches' role at the junior level; however, this does not appear to be the case at the high-performance junior level. While it was acknowledged by participants that enjoyment of the game, and 'wanting to play the game for the game's sake will lead to retention' (Coaching Development Specialist), and that the coach was pivotal to this, some coaches perceived 'retention not part of the role at elite level' (Assistant coach U17 male). If not selected to the high-performance pathway program, players are able to return to community level competition and this was noted as to where retention was impacted through the quality of the coach and coaching practice. There was not recognition that negative or unenjoyable experiences in the high-performance pathway program may turn players away from the sport. It was considered however, that retention may be impacted by the fact that once players return to community level involvement in the sport there is potentially not the same level of coaching quality and support, and also the standard of competition is lower which influence the players interest or passion to continue. The coaches felt that retention was more likely impacted by youth club players aged between 16 to 20 not making the high-performance program as the goal of being involved in the pathway program was to progress to the high-performance state level:

it's sort of a bit of a perception that if you don't make state squads, and that's sort of seen as the purpose of playing [sport] is to play state [sport] play for Australia...if they don't make a state squad, their sort of passion for the game filters off (Head coach U15 female).

If players at club level who believed they should be in the high-performance pathway program do not make it to the program it was felt that passion for the game has the potential to diminish due to the: 'limited quality opportunities at local level and lack of quality coaching...so lose interest' (Assistant coach U18 female). It was also noted by this participant that this was an age where other factors impact desire to play sport: 'we lose a lot of players between the age of 16 and 20, they get their license, there's other things to do, it's not so much fun...'

3.2. *Coaching practice*

A clear focus of coaching practice presented by the participants was the opportunity to practice athlete-centred coaching highlighting that players' personal as well as professional needs, goals, and health and wellbeing were considered. This was seen as a positive shift in coaching focus away from 'player skill development and championship results' (Head coach U15 female). As proposed by one participant but alluded to by others, it is 'important to develop people as a whole not just [sport] players... a lot more to coaching than knowing the game... it's about knowing your people' (Coaching Development Specialist), and when coaches reflected from the player perspective, it was that 'players want a coach that knows what they are talking about but also want a coach who knows them as a person' (Coaching Development Specialist).

Continuing professional development is a key component of being an effective coach and keeping skills and knowledge relevant (Nash, Sproule, & Horton, 2017) but also being prepared to be 'open to new methods' (Assistant coach U17 male). The participants in this research considered that coaching practice is influenced by the extent of opportunities for experience and education which has an important place in 'broadening skill sets' (Head coach U15 female). Participants actively sought opportunities formally and informally. All participants who were coaches had a minimum Level 2 national accreditation in the sport with all also having undertaken other forms of coach development including online courses and workshops run through the state sporting body, the national sporting body, and external agencies. Formal continuing professional development programs have been shown to improve coach retention, raise coaching standards and enhance coach learning (Nolan, 2004; Whitmore, 2002). However, they may not improve competence or change behaviours if they are compulsory (French & Dowds, 2008). For coaches in this research, additional training and education opportunities were mostly self-initiated in order to improve their skills and knowledge, and to keep up with the evolving changes in coaching practice. It was identified by participants that mentoring from other coaches was valued for professional as well as personal development and played 'a key part of coach development' (Head coach U15 & U17 male), valuing 'seeking feedback from other coaches trying to learn off them...get other coaches to watch me and then get some feedback' (Assistant coach U15 male). The coach participants all appeared self-directed and motivated to undertake additional personal development and although encouraged this was not a requirement of the state sporting body to maintain their coaching positions. One participant admitted, 'I would say the bulk of my learning has come from my own research I would think...I'm just a nerd who goes online and reads and watches stuff' (Head coach U18 female).

In this way, coaches are self-regulating their professional development and taking responsibility for their learning (Nash, Sproule, & Horton, 2017). Additionally, all coaches interviewed had previously coached or were still coaching community level in the sport or supporting other areas of the sport in addition to their roles in the high-performance pathway program youth squads. All were also currently playing or had played the sport at either community, state, or international levels. This combination of developed practical and theoretical skills was acknowledged by coaches as a key factor in how they approached their coaching practice.

Participants were asked to identify the key characteristics for quality coaching practice and responses were consistent across all participants. These characteristics ranged from technical knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and skills often referred to as the 'soft' skills, such as empathy and trust. These characteristics add to the those compiled by Tušak and Tušak (2001) who described the successful coach as being a good educator, highly motivated, flexible, having sound reasoning and self-confidence. Quality sport coaches also need to have transparent leadership skills and care about the safety of their athletes (Perez Ramirez, 2002). Becker (2013) determined that the seven qualities in a coach that positively impact athlete development and performance were coaches who were positive, supportive, individualised, fair, appropriate, clear, and consistent. The conception of quality coaching practice can be summed up by the JSES | <https://doi.org/10.36905/jses.2023.01.02>

following quote that reflects the perceptions of many participants; 'coaching traditionally skills focussed, it is important to focus on player needs; there are plenty of coaches with the technical skills but not all have the holistic skills...quality coaches can see beyond themselves' (Coaching Development Specialist).

3.3. Expectations for coach development

Participant experiences in this research indicate that coach development programs are valuable as coaches' desire to learn and improve their coaching skills and scope of practice. While there has been a lack of formalised, effective models for coach development, continued professional development that can be conducted in situ through mentoring or collaborative approaches is supported by coaches (Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2013) as the active learning processes are easily translatable to practice (Coffield, 2000). Therefore, working with a coach development specialist facilitates a way to improve in situ rather than offsite external courses undertaken outside of the coach's work role and paid time. All participants saw the value in participating in coach development programs. Those about to embark on season 2019/2020 were 'excited' and 'motivated' about the prospect of having an external coach development facilitator to support them in gaining new knowledge, enhancing existing skills, and looking at coaching practice from new perspectives. For example, '[the sport] is a unique space, and it's got a lot of history that goes with it...it would be really cool for it to go a bit more contemporary' (Assistant coach U15 male). Participants were receptive to exploring new ideas and methods, as 'the game is constantly evolving therefore coaching methodology needs to also be open to different points of view' (Assistant coach U17 male). A key point made in support of coach development was that there is 'a lot of emphasis on improving players, less focus on reviewing coaching performance' (Head coach U18 female) so support from the sporting body management in providing additional opportunities in coach development was embraced. Typical of the sentiment was that, although these coaches were self-motivated to seek coach extensive education it was acknowledged that 'can't rely solely on self-initiation of coach development' (Assistant coach U15 male). Self-motivation has previously been found to be one of the key factors in continuing professional development, along with certification, needing to remain competitive in the industry and employer requirements (Jakovljeva & Židens, 2011). A key point for consideration in this study is that these coaches were experienced in the sport and coaching, and their roles were paid positions in contrast to many community sporting coaching roles. There was the suggestion in this research that 'coaches often work in isolation' (Head coach U18 female), with the expectation from many participants that the inclusion of a formal coach development program would encourage more collaboration, peer support and mentoring, and sharing of ideas, resulting in the capacity to 'enhance strengths and address fallbacks' (Assistant coach U15 male).

A pilot Coach Enhancement Program had been conducted in the previous season. Those who had completed the pilot Coach Enhancement Program ($n=2$), found the focus on change in 'coaching to player development rather than championships' (Head coach U15 female) beneficial, and their improved confidence and clarity of messages and purpose was validated in

feedback from players. It was commonly noted that there was a 'growth area in coach development in looking after the whole person' (Assistant coach U15 male) and this is not necessarily formally taught to coaches, and so perceived as an area lacking in more generic coach development courses. The shift away from a focus on championships is an interesting conundrum given young athletes know who has won despite the move to remove scoring from some junior sports (Agnew et al., 2016) and is unlikely to be the case in the context of high-performance youth development squads. Therefore, winning is still perceived as important to the junior athletes despite the shift away from such a focus. The need to develop players supports the need for coach development programs that go beyond skills and have more of a focus on the whole person and well-being. Some concerns were raised by participants mainly around processes of the proposed Coach Development Program that were new to them, such as observation and reflection on their coaching behaviour. Participants of the pilot program would have liked more time with the coach developer and felt that the information and the pedagogical knowledge was at times 'overwhelming' (Assistant coach U15 female) as there was much to share and discuss, but time with the coach developer was limited. These factors were addressed and considered in the 2019/2020 season format of the proposed Coach Development Program in an attempt to enhance the benefits of the program and encourage participants to be engaged in the process and to motivate behaviour change. Kokko, Kannas, and Villberg (2006) and Skille (2010) have found that sport settings can be a key environment for promoting health as well as social good. Continued investment and resources in health and sport

promotion programs is needed in sports clubs to facilitate sustainable change in behaviour (Donaldson & Finch, 2011).

Through consideration of themes developed from the data and discussed above it can be concluded that the coaches believed that they were creating environments that were about more than the sport, although the reason they were in the position to create such environments was their role in developing the players sport performance potential. In desiring to create an environment for the development of the 'whole' player, ability to develop honest relationships with players as well as their parents was necessary because of the age of the players. This ability to develop honest relationships extended to enabling players and parents to realise that 'not everyone will make it' through the program. While the coaches were pointed to creating an environment for player development, the coaches believed more could be done by the sport to create an environment for coach development. This is summarised as Figure 1.

3.4. Study strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is the qualitative methodology selected to promote insight, affinity and appreciation into the perception of coaches and their work in an elite youth sport coaching setting. A limitation is the sample size and single point in time data collection. Future research on coaching in youth sport high-performance settings is required in other sports and using a variety of research perspectives.

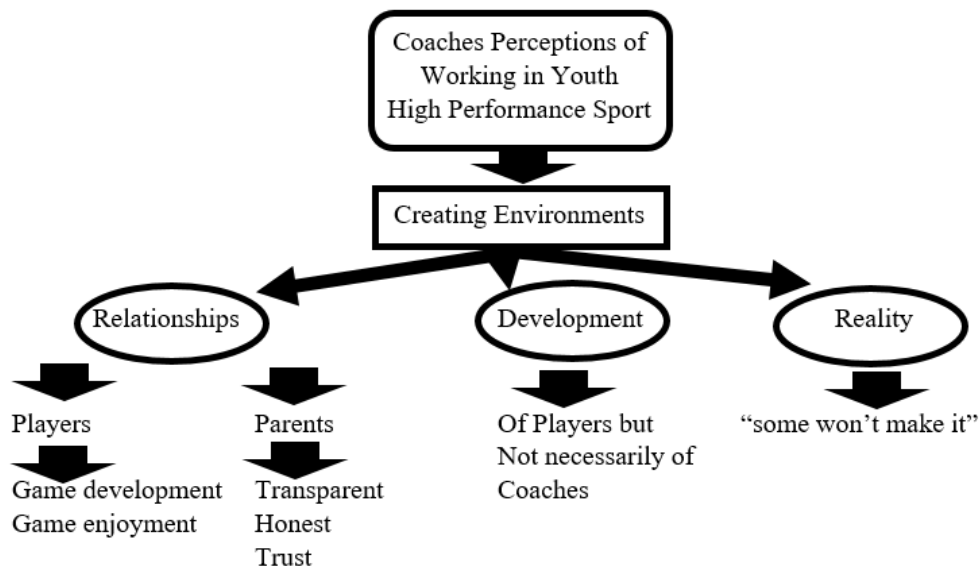


Figure 1: Coaches perceived their work to be creating environments where relationships with player and parent, athlete-centred coaching for player development, and being realistic about the outcome of program for some players, are present.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study provided insight into perceptions of Australian coaches and coaching, and the role of the coach in the player experience and developing the sport and the players involved in high-performance pathway program youth squads. It is evident that coaches want more support and opportunities in coach development and acknowledge the potential benefits: to themselves in increasing their knowledge, skills, confidence, and quality of coaching provided; to the players' enjoyment of playing the game at a high-performance level and retention in the sport overall, and to other contributing stakeholders.

While skill development and wellbeing of players was widely recognised and acknowledged by the coaches in this study as part of their work role it is also recognised that there is little attention paid to the coaches' development and wellbeing. This stresses the need for more formal Coach Development Programs to be initiated and supported by sporting bodies and for the experiences of coaches to be recognised and used in the development of such programs. This is more likely to occur at the high-performance level of sport where coaching roles are paid and considered work, however, further research in this area would also benefit coaches and coach development at the community level in unpaid roles where the need exists but is often not implemented due to lack of resources and funds. Further research is warranted into how coaches can best develop their own coaching practice in a way that is acceptable to their needs and capacity, and to the benefit of the players who they are ultimately responsible for.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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