

Male and Female Athletes' Perceptions of their Coaches' Communication

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores social exchange theory in relationships between college coaches and athletes. There are positive and negative aspects of athletes' perceptions of their coaches' recruitment styles, communication competence, ability to motivate, support, and leadership styles. Past studies have looked into student-athletes' perceptions of their coaches' communication and relationship with their student-athletes. This study builds on this research by exploring student-athlete alumni perceptions of their coaches. As a previous student-athlete alumna on the track and field team at Youngstown State University, I encountered a variety of experiences with multiple coaches. I interviewed seven men and seven women alumni who were members of the Youngstown State University Track and Field team. I used three demographic questions, 26 nonverbal immediacy scale-observer questions (Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003), and five open ended questions to apply the social exchange theory to athletes' perceptions of their coaches' communication competence, motivation, support, and leadership styles. Results also indicate a difference between men's and women's perception of their coaches. Women's primary factors included support combined with trust from coaches. Men mainly looked at their individual performance, injuries, and financial aid to figure out whether they wanted to be on the team or not. This study indicates that athletes are satisfied when their coaches treat athletes like friends and treat each individual athlete with care.

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## **Introduction**

The coach-athlete relationship is an important factor in the success of student-athletes' sport performance (Philippe & Seiler, 2006). In athletics, communication plays a key role (Burke, Czech, Geyerman, Haselwood, Joyner, Munkasy, & Zwald, 2005). The top factor in successful coaching is the ability to communicate well. Coaches use communication skills to motivate athletes, manage team and player conflicts, and provide instruction. This communication is valuable since coaches are an important figure in student-athletes' lives for many reasons (Buning & Thompson, 2015).

Athletes are going through many challenges, including strong competition, tough college academics, homesickness, and time demands (Brann & Cranmer, 2015). Athletes' desire for positive, supportive relationships with their coaches increases even more when they have been involved with the sport for a long period of time. Therefore, coaches' recruitment, communication competence, motivation, support, and leadership style affect student-athletes' ability, motivation, and performance (Infante & Kassing, 1999).

## **Review of Previous Research**

### **Recruitment**

Since recruitment is an important factor for every university, finding the top student-athletes requires a strategic process (Letawsky, Palmer, Pedersen, & Schneider, 2003). Most Division I, II, and III coaches are the first people to encourage student-athletes to enroll at a particular university (Conley, Downs, & Lombardi, 2012). Coaches are one of the primary reasons student-athletes come to their university. This gives college coaches the power to select and influence high school athletes. Research suggests

ways for coaches to successfully recruit athletes: (a) recruit local athletes (Barden, Bluhm, Mitchell, & Lee, 2013); (b) give athletes' college readiness tests (Conley, Downs, & Lombardi, 2012); (c) explain a variety of reasons to come to their school (Letawsky, Palmer, Pedersen, & Schneider, 2003); (d) delay commitment deadlines (Bricker & Hanson, 2013).

When coaches start searching for student-athletes, the first place they should look is at the nearby high schools (Barden, Bluhm, Mitchell, & Lee, 2013). There are social advantages of coaches recruiting student-athletes that are close to home. Local student-athletes are able to share his or her relevant knowledge about the area with the team and coaches and promote social cohesion by introducing friends in the area to teammates and coaches.

Since the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) requires certain academic standards for student-athletes to stay on teams, research results indicate that coaches should give college readiness tests to recruits (Conley, Downs, & Lombardi, 2012). By finding student-athletes that seem to be ready for college, student-athlete retention may increase. College readiness is the level of skills and preparation that a high school graduate needs in order to succeed in a university or college without remediation. The readiness tests allow coaches and academic advisors to check the recruits' understanding of core academic subjects, see if the recruits can find ways to understand material, reassure that recruits can manage a college workload, and make sure recruits understand how to be accepted into and be successful in college.

Next, Letawsky, Palmer, Pedersen, and Schneider (2003) suggest that coaches should sell the whole university to the student-athlete. Student-athletes' choices to join a

college or university team are vital in student-athlete recruitment success. Coaches successfully gain students' interests when they describe head coaches, degree-program options, on campus academic support services, types of community on and/or by campus, sport related pep rallies and/or other traditions, opportunities for travel, and athletic facilities to student-athletes.

After coaches give athletes their paperwork to sign on to a team, research results suggest coaches should postpone the sign-on deadline (Bricker & Hanson, 2013).

Athletic recruits' commitment delays positively correlate with higher athletic success.

Athletes that commit earlier usually have less playing time in season. If coaches did not delay the commitment date, it would cut off the opportunity for athletes to join a team.

Furthermore, stronger athletes tend to commit late, so there would be risks of denying successful athletes.

### **Communication Competence and Motivation**

Once athletes are successfully recruited, Watson (2011) recommends that coaches interact with athletes effectively to promote their individual and team success.

Communication competence is an adaptable, multi-faceted skill and learned behavior that requires knowledge. This learned behavior involves effectiveness and appropriateness.

Effectiveness is the ability to achieve goals or a goal. Coaches attempt to maintain

athletes' goals by estimating the athletes amount of effort and level of competitiveness

(Infante & Kassing, 1999). Appropriateness is the ability to normally proceed in the

current situation or context (Watson, 2011). Research results suggest that coaches should

use their communication competence for effective verbal, nonverbal, interpersonal, and

instructional communication to their athlete. This strengthens student-athlete cognitive and affective behavior, which may contribute to team success.

Athletes' perceptions of coach communication competence relate to the effectiveness of the head coach's communication (Burke, Czech, Geyerman, Haselwood, Joyner, Munkasy, & Zwald, 2005). Previous research has discovered a relationship between coach-athlete communication and athletic performance on a women's collegiate track and field team. After developing interpersonal communication skills in a 36-week training program, the coaches enhanced athletes' positive assessments and increased athletic performances among the athletes. Coaches improve their communication competence by efficiently sending and receiving messages and achieving communication goals for their athletes.

Coaches alter their own communication competence by choosing how to motivate their athletes (Buning & Thompson, 2015). Motivation is the drive for someone to gain talent an energy (Tomczak, & Walczak, 2012). Extrinsic motivation is the communication between coaches and athletes. The interaction between coaches and athletes can also influence athletes' motivation and enjoyment of their sport (Buning & Thompson, 2015). When athletes are not happy with their coach's feedback, their athletic performance and enjoyment will decrease. Athletes' extrinsic motivation could improve if coaches related to the type of motivation that works best with each individual athlete (Tomczak, & Walczak, 2012). Athletes' motivation is likely to increase when their coach is clear, is direct, and praises athletes, and is likely to decrease when their coach avoids communication after an athletic performance (Buning & Thompson, 2015). Researchers conducted interviews to find out athletes' perceptions of their coaches'



positive motivation. In effort to positively motivate student-athletes, athletes recommend coaches have athletes practice competitive drills, encourage athletes to set goals, and encourage athletes to reach for personal best performances.

### **Leadership and Support**

Turman and Schrodtt (2004) suggest the leadership styles coaches use to increase the success and satisfaction of athletes include democratic leadership, positive feedback, training and instruction, and social support. When coaches use autocratic leadership, they may increase or decrease their athletes' success. Autocratic leadership in coaching is coaches' authoritative separation between themselves and athletes. Coaches use power in autocratic leadership. Power is defined as the ability to influence an individual or group to do something he, she or they would not have done (Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015). Coaches potentially use their power to influence the development of athletes' sport-related skill sets.

To maintain or develop communication symmetry, or communicating equally with shared interests and understanding, coaches strive to prevent coercive power, and use socially supportive power, also known as reward power (Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015). Coaches increase their athletes' satisfaction with overall sport experiences when they use reward power (Cranmer & Sollitto, 2015). When athletes perceive that coaches use reward power, they perceive that their coaches give them psychological, social, or tangible benefits, and/or take away punishments (Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015). These benefits may include praise, recognition, or playing time.

On the other hand, coercive power may lead to aggressive behavior in coaches (Infante & Kassing, 1999). Verbal aggression in terms of coaching is coaches' destructive communication which attacks the athlete. This leads to psychological pain for the athlete. If coaches inaccurately predict athletes' level of effort and their goals for the athlete are different than the athletes' personal goals, coaches may become frustrated and aggressive. Coaches can minimize aggression to help their athletes be more satisfied, have successful sport careers, and have sportsmanship.

Research results suggest that coaches should use social support leadership style to satisfy athletes' interpersonal needs (Turman & Schrodts, 2004). Social support for athletes positively correlates with athlete quality, satisfaction, and motivation (Brann & Cranmer, 2015). Social support in college athletics is the quality of student-athlete and coach relationships, and/or the size of networks for student-athletes (Cranmer & Sollitto, 2015). Socially supportive relationships between coaches and athletes are caring, close, complimentary, and co-orientated (Philippe & Seiler, 2006). Closeness is the essential requirement between coaches and athletes. Complementarity is the act of acceptance and respect between coaches and athletes to form positive relationships. Co-orientation is the overall communication and establishment of goals. Both athletes and coaches should maintain positive relationships with each other to help improve athletic performance.

Coaches also support the athletes by using democratic leadership, positive feedback, training, and instruction (Turman & Schrodts, 2004). Coaches' democratic leadership style includes student-athletes in sport-related decisions. Coaches have a positive feedback leadership style when they show appreciation for athletes. Coaches' training and instruction leadership style is when they develop student-athletes' skills and

knowledge. Athletes are more satisfied when they receive informational, emotional, and esteem support from their coach, both verbally and nonverbally (Cranmer & Sollitto, 2015). Coaches give their athletes pertinent information, help their athletes deal with emotional distress, demonstrate concern for their athletes, respond to athletes' needs, and reinforce athletes' self-worth and abilities. Athletes feel more supported with confirmation from their coaches (Brann & Cranmer, 2015). This is when coaches make athletes feel recognized, endorsed, and knowledgeable. Coaches can decide the best way to socially support and confirm with their athletes. Coaches confirm with athletes by communicating with athletes individually, encouraging athletes to improve their performance, recognizing athletes' accomplishments, and demonstrating investment and dedication to coaching.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange theory is the theory that one person's behavior influences the other person's rewards and benefits (Choi, Guay, Mitchell, Mount, Oh, & Shin, 2016). How people behave can increase rewards or costs in a relationship or relationships. People are interdependent in a relationship. For example, if partner 1 receives benefits from partner 2, partner 1 will feel obligated to return the favor with a benefit to partner 2. This social exchange theory principle is the norm of reciprocity. If one person perceives the costs to outweigh the benefits in the relationship, then he or she will not think it is worth it to stay in the relationship (Carpenter, Cury, Guillet, Sarrazin, & Trouilloud, 2010). In terms of applying this to athletes and coaches, if athletes think the costs of being on the team outweighs the benefits, then athletes will want to quit. Coaches have

the power to influence athletes' costs and benefits, such as satisfaction (Choi, Guay, Mitchell, Mount, Oh, and Shin, 2016).

Social exchange theory has been used to explain how employee and employer behavior influence one and other (Choi, Guay, Mitchell, Mount, Oh, & Shin, 2016). Employers motivate employees to sustain positive results. This helps retain employees and helps outcomes of organizations. In sports contexts, employers are like coaches and employees are like athletes. The social exchange between coaches and athletes can benefit or harm their relationship. It may benefit the relationship between coaches and athletes when coaches agree with athletes, or athletes agree with coaches. Coaches motivate athletes and behave in a positive way, so athletes will want to perform well in return. Other desired consequences for student-athletes include learning and improving skills, affiliating with others, and being better than competitors (Carpenter, Cury, Guillet, Sarrazin, & Trouilloud, 2010).

On the other hand, deviant behavior in the workplace are volunteered behaviors that are harmful to other coworkers (Choi, Guay, Mitchell, Mount, Oh, & Shin, 2016). Coaches' personalities can influence these negative actions. These actions would be a cost, rather than a benefit in the relationship between coaches and athletes. Peoples' satisfaction in their jobs may be altered by others' deviance in workplaces and the degree to which other people agree with them at work.

Within the cost/benefit analysis of athletes, enjoyment of the sport is another perceived benefit (Carpenter, Cury, Guillet, Sarrazin, & Trouilloud, 2010). Coaches' personalities and their deviant behavior may alter athletes' satisfaction in their sport. Players that dropped out of their sport perceived themselves as having less progress in

their sport and then perceived their coach of being less supportive to them. Therefore, the athletes' success and coaches' level of support for athletes impacts athletes' cost/benefit analysis and sport satisfaction level.

### **Research Questions**

Previous research has looked into current athletes' perceptions of their coaches, yet has not studied student-athlete alumni perceptions of their past coaches. Alumni can be honest since they are not currently student-athletes. They have had time to reflect on the relationship and remember the perceived benefits and costs in their relationship with their coach. The previous literature has also not considered coaches' communication competence and relationships toward athletes during recruitment. Lastly, this study has not found research has not found research on gender differences between athletes' perceptions of their coaches. This study will use the social exchange theory to discover costs and benefits in the relationships between coaches and athletes. Specifically, I am looking at the perceived costs and benefits of coaches' recruitment style, communication competence, leadership, ability to support their athletes, and ability to motivate their athletes. These experiences will help answer why athletes are satisfied with their relationship with their coaches or not. This study will also find out if male and female athletes have similar perceptions of their coaches in terms of perceptions their coaches' nonverbal communication competence, recruitment style, communication competence, motivation, leadership, and support.

**RQ1:** Based off student-athletes' perceptions their coaches' nonverbal communication, recruitment style, communication competence, motivation, leadership,

and support, what are the main factors for student-athletes to be satisfied with their coaches?

**RQ2:** Based off student-athletes' perceptions their coaches' nonverbal communication, recruitment style, communication competence, motivation, leadership, and support, how will men and women view their coaches differently?

### **My Background**

As a previous student-athlete, I have experienced the good, the bad, and the ugly of the communication between coaches and athletes. I was on the track and field team two years ago. I have experienced four years of track and field, and had two main event coaches. I started my college athletic career in August 2011 and finished May 2015 at Youngstown State University. I have had time to reflect on and remember the important memories that stick with me after being on the team and remember my perceived benefits and costs in the relationship with my coach.

Initially, I did not perceive my coach as having communication competence during the recruitment process. My coach did not always look directly in the eye and she did not seem to want to get closer to me when we talked. I joined the team because my brother was on the team, and I felt that my coach valued me even more than the other athletes since my brother was on the team and I would help my brother out as well. I was also awarded a full-tuition scholarship, which was the best scholarship offer I received out of four schools.

I did feel more valuable as a local student-athlete as well. I already had an established group of friends that I could introduce to my track and field friends. I had family members who would come to all the events to support the team. It was easier for

me to get a full scholarship since my tuition as a Mahoning Valley resident was less expensive than if I lived out of state or even out of county. I already knew the area, so I could recommend places to go for teammates that were from out of town.

During my time as a student-athlete, I did see some student-athletes get kicked off the team because of low GPAs. It does seem necessary for colleges and universities to test recruits' college readiness skills before they commit. This would help reinforce importance of doing well in college, and it may also prevent student-athletes from getting kicked off teams. The athletic department could filter out the athletes that do not do well in, or care about academics, before possibly having to kick them off the team. When athletic departments kick players off their teams, it does not look good for athletic departments, schools, and athletes that are kicked off.

When I was a recruit, I had multiple reasons to come to YSU. My scholarship and feeling like a valuable part of the track and field team were my top reasons. I also chose YSU because they had the degree program I was interested in, the academic support service was in a convenient location, many of my family members and friends went to YSU or planned on going to YSU the same year as me, my family members wanted me to stay close to home, there were plenty of opportunities to travel with the track and field team, and the new athletic facility opened up the same semester I planned to enroll. Sport related pep rallies, other traditions, and high school teammates did not influence my decision to come to YSU.

Lastly, if the YSU athletic department or coaches were strict about the deadline to sign on to my team, I would not have been able to join the team. I was late on my decision to sign-on since I wanted to see if another school, Kent State University, would

offer me more scholarship funds since YSU gave me full-tuition. Luckily, I communicated with the head coach about my delay and he was understanding.

### **Communication Competence**

After joining the track and field team, I was with my first coach for a year, then had a different coach the next year. I perceived my new coach's communication competence to be very high when she first became our coach. I thought she was more empathetic, monitored our goals, and taught us scientific explanations of our events. I thought she was verbally inspiring and used positive nonverbals. She connected with the athletes on a social level, but was not very personal. After a challenging year of coaching, she did not treat me the same the next two years. She may have been holding a grudge against me, since I was there during her worst coaching experiences. This conflict reversed my perception of her communication competence. She displayed effective communication competence when she was recruiting athletes, and toward certain athletes, but during practice I did not think her communication was effective. She would verbally call out certain athletes during practice, and her nonverbals would communicate disinterest in certain athletes. She would put her back to athletes when she did not want to talk to them. She would not physically touch athletes on the shoulder for encouragement or to show she cares.

When my coach altered her communication, she stopped extrinsically motivating and stopped encouraging me to perform well. I was not happy with her feedback. I ended up becoming unmotivated and unpassionate about my sport, which led to my performance decreasing. I stopped enjoying what I was doing. It felt like a chore to come to practice every day. I would set up multiple meetings with my coach to try to strengthen



our relationship, but they only made the problems worse. I would recommend what works for me, such as seeing videos of our practice. When nothing changed with the practice, I would become more upset that my coach did not want to take my recommendations into consideration. Our communication started to decrease. I felt like my coach did not care to motivate me and help me increase my performance. Worse of all, I felt disrespected.

### **Leadership and Support**

My second coach primarily had an autocratic leadership style of coaching. She made a clear separation between her and her athletes. She would threaten the athletes and I perceived her power use as showing dominance. She always seemed to be trying to prove herself. She displayed coercive power, rather than socially supportive power. She used an aggressive behavior when she called me out during drills, and embarrassed me in front of the rest of the athletes. The other athletes would joke about it since I would perform the drill the same way everyone else performed it. She claimed to call me out specifically because I was the leader, and she hoped the others would learn from it. Her behavior made it difficult for the athletes to communicate with her. She decreased my satisfaction in my sport since I did not enjoy seeing her at practice. She used her power to reward and punish us during practice. When we did well, she would cheer loudly. When we did not do well, she shouted at us.

She did, however, have good days. Occasionally she would be social and friendly with us. We would have enjoyable practices, which helped us do well. She would use co-orientation when she had us write down our goals each year. She had good days in which she would post videos of our performance on our Facebook group page with positive and

constructive comments for each athlete. This did make us feel more appreciated and made us feel she cared about us individually. She did say “happy birthday” to us and she made an inspirational video with pictures and short clips of us. She showed us the video before a championship track and field meet.

Normally, she gave the athletes a high quantity of feedback, yet we were unsure it was quality feedback. We did not particularly trust her recommendations, which made it difficult to perform. The athletes that decided not to listen to her were the athletes that were the most successful.

If I was having a hard time with something, my coach would not be the person I would go to for help or advice. She was actually the primary factor of my stress. Overall, our relationship was not positive. It seemed there was not much I could do whenever I tried to make our relationship stronger.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

When I was a recruit and on my first semester of track and field, I thought the benefits of being on the team outweighed the costs. I got free schooling, free quality personal training, academic support, athletic support, and the feeling of accomplishment. After the coach changed and my new coach’s communication competence was lower, I thought the costs outweighed the benefits. I felt her behavior was deviant. Her and I disagreed on everything, so I was not satisfied in what I was doing. Her personality conflicted with mine, and we did not agree on anything. I thought I could find another way to spend my time to pay for college. I started researching how much time I would have to spend to make the same amount of money I made as an athlete to pay for college.

For a while I thought it would be worth it to quit, and make money in a way that would not cause as much stress.

I decided to stay on the team, in hopes that my 5<sup>th</sup> year of my academics would be paid for with my athletic scholarship. It was paid for, and I ended up double majoring. This gave me enough time to realize I want to go to graduate school so I could start a career at a university. After going into my graduate studies, I realized I want to be a professor. This led me to the thesis track, which allowed me to decide to write my thesis on the relationship between coaches and athletes. Now I think the benefits outweighed the costs of participating, because my experiences with my coach ended up being a contributing factor in forming my career path. I would like to help prevent coach communication issues in college athletics.

### **Method**

I conducted 14 phone call interviews with student-athlete alumni on the YSU track and field team. Before the interviews were conducted, I texted or Facebook messaged each participant and asked if they would like to participate in a phone interview. If he or she agreed, we set up a phone call interview time. During the interviews, I asked 3 demographic questions, (See Appendix A). I also asked 26 nonverbal communication scale questions (See Appendix B). Lastly, I asked 5 open questions about each former student athlete's perceptions of his or her past coaches' recruitment style/influence, communication competence, motivation, leadership style, and support (See Appendix C). I used social exchange theory as a gridding framework to figure out if their benefits outweigh the costs in their relationship with their coaches.

The nonverbal immediacy scale was used to measure athletes' perception of their coach's nonverbal communication competence. The survey questions are McCrosky's (2003) nonverbal immediacy scale-observer report (NIS-O). I chose this scale because the validity is rated excellent (Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003). The alpha reliability of the scale is about .90 and there is more face validity than other similar scales is because of the diverse items. The result of each athlete's score for the (NIS-O) were calculated according to the directions. Half of the items indicate high immediacy and the other half of the items indicate lack of immediacy. I added the score of each statement that indicated high nonverbal immediacy with the number 78. I then subtracted the score of each statement that indicated a lack of nonverbal immediacy to get the total.

The totals were ranged as either high, average, or low. In the scale, Low = <79 and High = >109. In this study, 2 men and 3 women scored low. 5 men and 2 women scored average. 2 women scored high. Items were summed (M= 88.4, SD= 15.5). The normal mean score is 94.2 so the mean in this study is lower than the average, but still within a standard deviation of the mean. These answers of athletes' perception of their coach's nonverbal communication competence related to student-athletes' answers to the 5 open ended questions of how they perceive their coach's communication competence, motivation, leadership, and support.

**Sample.** The selected interviewed participants are 7 female and 7 male student-athlete alumni of Youngstown State University men's and women's track and field team. The alumni were on the team at least four years ago for memory reliability. The alumni could be honest in the interviews since they are not currently a student-athlete. They have had time to reflect on and remember their perceived benefits and costs in their

relationship with their coach. The alumni described the important memories that stuck with them after being on the team. The participants in this study described seven different coaches: three female and four male coaches. Two female and four male athletes said they quit the team before their eligibility expired. Four female athletes said they thought about quitting. One female and three male athletes did not mention quitting.

**Coding.** I coded the interview transcripts using the direct coding method. First, I separated the male and female athletes' answers. Next, I grouped the athletes' results of the (NIS-O) scale. These results were whether athletes perceived their coaches of having high, medium, or low nonverbal immediacy. Then, I used direct coding to look for the benefits and the costs in their relationship with their coaches and with being on the team. I discovered themes that emerged from athletes' costs and benefits in terms of their perceptions of their coaches' communication competence, motivation, leadership, and support. Lastly, I compared male and female athletes' themes that emerged.

## **Results**

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asked what factors allow student-athletes to be satisfied with their coaches. Interviewees' satisfaction appeared to be the outcome of coaches treating them like friends and treating them with unconditional support. The interviewees in this study define coaches as "friends" when coaches are involved, personable, easy to talk to, close, friendly, personal, approachable, understanding, relatable, and welcoming. Another theme that emerged from the coding of interview responses was that female athletes look for unconditional support from coaches. Examples of coaches' unconditional support include coaches being inclusive with every

athlete, consistently supporting athletes throughout their college career, supporting athletes despite injuries and athletic performances, and supporting athletes without being biased.

**Coaches Treat Athletes like Friends.** Many of the athletes say they like when their coaches act like friends. One athlete explained that a coach she perceived as having high communication competence was more involved, more personable, and easier to talk to. Another female athlete said she liked how her coach was close, friendly, and personal. An athlete said the coach that she perceived as high communication competence “was good at being personal and approachable, which I prefer in a coach.” The next athlete said, “My coach was truly a friend, but you understood when it was worktime. It was a working relationship, or a partnership.” The last athlete said she thought the effective leadership style in her favorite coach involved developing personal relationships.”

One of the male athletes talked about a coach that he perceived as having high communication competence. He said his key motivator was that his coach was his friend before becoming his coach. He said this allowed his coach to understand, connect, and be close to athletes. He said his coach “kept things light, fun, energetic, which made me enjoy the thing that I wasn’t excited about.” Another male student-athlete said his coach’s communication style was decent since his coach made sure the athletes were eating well, practicing well, keeping up with studies, and having a good experience. He said his coach “knows about all his student-athletes.” He also said his coach would do the workouts with the group, which was motivating.

Student-athletes related their positive recruitment experience to their coach treating them like a friend. A female athlete said, “My coach’s recruitment style was very

personable, relatable, and welcoming.” A male student-athlete had a similar perception of their coach during recruitment. He said first he contacted his coach, then they became friends, and finally he received a scholarship offer. He said this solidified his decision to come to YSU. This indicates that student-athletes are satisfied and likely to join the team when their coach treats athletes like a friend during recruitment.

**Women’s views of Unconditional Support from Coaches.** Women primarily look for unconditional support from their coaches. Some female athletes did not feel satisfied because their coaches did not focus on all the athletes. One athlete said she did not like how her coach only liked a specific group. She said, “Your team should not feel like that.” Another female student-athlete that had a low score on their coach’s nonverbal communication also said, “My coach focused on particular people.” She explained that, “Sometimes it seemed like my coach didn’t fully care.” She related this feeling to lack of support. The next female athlete said her coach’s leadership style “didn’t build a strong diverse group, it built the same type of athlete. If you couldn’t mold into the program, you were left out.” Another athlete also said her coach “was biased, which created a bad relationship.” An athlete that said the coach that she perceived as having high nonverbal immediacy knew how to “individually motivate each student-athlete”. Her coach did not just select particular athletes to motivate so she was unbiased and gave athletes unconditional support.

A female athlete that was unsatisfied with her coach explained that her coach did not always respond to text messages, lacked eye contact, and barely talked to her until she started performing well. This indicates that her coach adjusted his verbal and nonverbal communication based off of her performance. She said that, even after her

coach started treating her better, she did not feel satisfied because she knew he only treated her better since she performed well.

There were multiple athletes that felt similarly about coaches that treat athletes better when they perform well. Another female explained that she felt unsupported and dissatisfied by her coach because her coach only cared about her when she started doing well. She almost quit because of lack of support from her main coach and lack of improvement. The next female athlete said her coach, when she viewed as low communication competence, “would never see my potential, and wouldn’t try to get me out of my injury. If you weren’t scoring all the points, you weren’t important. I never seemed supported by my coach.” The last athlete said her coach “stepped out of his way to support a lot of the females.” She said she quit when she stopped feeling supported by her coach. She came back on the team to receive a special award. This indicates her need for unconditional support.

There are some athletes that experience coaches that supported them despite their athletic performance. These athletes were satisfied with their coaches. One athlete that said despite her performance, her coach would keep her going. She said her coach made it seem like “if I would do well, she did well.” Another athlete said she was satisfied with her coach because athletic performance did not change the way her coach communicated to the athletes. The next athlete said, “I felt very satisfied and supported. I had trouble my freshman year, but they did not give up on me.” The last athlete said, “My coach convinced me to stay on the team when I wanted to quit, even though I was injured and had physical and mental issues from being injured. Overall, he was supportive with the way he interacted with me.”



**Men's views of Unconditional Support from Coaches.** Like the females, the male athletes are not satisfied when their coaches only support certain athletes, does not go out of their way for athletes, and does not consistently support athletes. One male athlete that had a low perception of their coach's nonverbal communication said his coach had a poor recruitment style. He said his coach "wouldn't go out of the way, he would just let people come to him." This represents a lack of support or care for recruits. Another male athlete said, "When things are going well, my coach was supportive and we understood everything. When things weren't going well, the communication stopped existing." The last athlete said he did not feel supported because his coach did not know how to communicate with certain types of athletes and did not always make eye contact. These represent athletes' dissatisfaction with inconsistent support from coaches.

On the other hand, male athletes were satisfied when their coaches gave them unconditional support. A male athlete was satisfied with his coach because his coach's communication style is entertaining, adaptable, and personal. He said his coach "tries as much as he can to help out." He explained that his coach unconditionally supported athletes. Another athlete described his coach's communication as available, upfront, and understanding. The last athlete said he felt supported in all aspects with one of his coaches. He said this coach was the most communicative and understanding. He said this coach would go out of the way to support everyone individually.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked about the difference between male and female athletes' perceptions of their coaches. Interviewees' gender differences appeared

to be the outcome of women being concerned with trust in relationships and men being concerned with their physical performances and personal athletic scholarships.

**Women Seek Trust in their Coaches.** Female participants said they were satisfied with their coaches when they received support from their coach and they trusted their coach. They did not feel supported if they did not trust their coach. One athlete said her coach's communication changed throughout her career. Her coach started off with mostly verbal communication. As the years went on, her coach used less verbal communication and more texting. She said, "Senior year was mostly texting, more talking behind the back, which included 'he said she said' action." She said she could not trust her coach because she perceived her coach as inconsistent. She almost quit because of her coach and lack of improvement. She said, "It was a really tough four years for me. I would be totally ok if she was the way she was because I wasn't practicing well. But that was not the case." She explained how she did not feel supported and satisfied at all.

Another athlete had a similar experience with distrusting her coach. She said her coach's communication was "really unprofessional. Just doing whatever to make it better at the moment." She said her coach would not fully listen and would "nod and agree with you, but won't go through." She thought her coach would not take suggestions and "would say one thing to us, and different things to the other coaches." When her coach tried motivating her individually, she did not trust her coach. She said, "It was hard to take my coach's words as motivation." Another female agrees in terms of her perception of her coach. She said she felt that "there was no trust, motivation, or positive feelings."

These two female athletes perceived their coach's leadership as a dictatorship. The first athlete said, "My coach doesn't take anyone else's input very well and definitely

goes behind your back. That's not what (an effective) leader does." The second athlete said she thought her coach was the only one that had power. She thought her coach put blame on other factors rather than herself. When she stopped trusting her coach, she thought her coach "wasn't a true leader because no one wanted to follow her. She was trying to bring everyone against everyone." She said her coach tried coaching an unfamiliar event, pretended to know how to coach the event, then some athletes got injured and transferred. She said, "How people performed while having this coach comes down to your mental strength and physical ability." She thought the longer people had her coach, the more her coach messed with their minds.

Two other athletes said they did not feel satisfied or supported by their coach because they thought their coach was fake. One athlete said, "My coach was fake and didn't care about certain groups." The next athlete further described her feelings. "My coach led by basically providing a false sense of friendship and understanding. This seemed like my coach would agree with you to get you to do what she wanted you to do." This athlete thought her coach used confirmation as power.

**Men Seek Personal Performance and Scholarships.** Although men in the study were concerned with their coaches' amount of support, results suggest that men's perception of their interpersonal relationships with their coaches were not a primary reason for them to stay on the team. Men that quit said they did not want to stay on the team because they were not performing well, or they did not receive scholarships that they were offered. A male athlete who viewed his coach's nonverbal communication as low said his coach's communication was his strength. "He would figure out if (his athletes) were more of a verbal, visual and/or kinesthetic learner, and teach (them)

accordingly.” However, he first said his coach did not motivate athletes. “If you didn’t come all the time, he didn’t encourage you to come back. This didn’t seem right because their job is to motivate student-athletes.” Results indicate that there is a difference in student-athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ interpersonal communication competence compared to their coaches’ ability to improve physical performance of athletes.

The men that received a scholarship at the end of their visit perceived their recruitment experience as positive. A student-athlete that perceived his coach as having average communication nonverbal immediacy said he liked his coach’s recruitment style since his coach was happy and peppy during his visit and gave informative answers to his questions. He also received a scholarship offer at the end of the visit. Another student-athlete said, even though he had to reach out to his coach first during recruitment, he received a scholarship offer which solidified his decision to come to YSU. Another athlete said that his coach motivated him through a potential scholarship: “The scholarship was motivation for me to perform better.”

The male student-athletes that quit the team said their reasons were separate from their coaches and their perception of their coach’s communication competence. Each male athlete explained their overall view of their coach’s communication, yet it did not affect their reason for why they quit. Their reasons include personal injuries and their lack of promised athletic scholarships. A male student-athlete that had a low perception of his coach’s nonverbal communication explained his overall feelings of support from his coach. He said, “As far as communication, it was good, but could be better. It was hard to tell if she would have been up for suggestions.” However, he quit the track and field team because of an injury. The next athlete said he felt satisfied with knowing what

his coach wanted him to do to achieve his goals but his coach could have been happier about his accomplishments and could have made practice more fun. He ended up quitting because he was promised a scholarship that he never received. The last athlete said, “I was satisfied with the amount of support that my coach gave us. There is a lot going on. It was good to be able to fall back on him sometimes.” He said his coach tried to help him, but he ended up quitting the team because of his injuries. Therefore, men mainly look at their individual performance, injuries, and financial aid to figure out if they want to be on the team or not.

## **Discussion**

### **Research Question 1**

Athletes were satisfied with their coaches’ communication, recruitment, leadership, and level of support when their coaches treated them like friends and treat them with unconditional support. Previous literature suggested that coaches use social support leadership styles to satisfy athletes’ interpersonal needs (Turman & Schrodt, 2004). Results from the interviews indicated that student-athletes are satisfied when coaches used social support. However, there were multiple types of social support that emerged. There is a support associated with trust, unconditional support, and support like a friend.

**Coaches can be like Friends.** Previous research suggests that socially supportive relationships between coaches and athletes are caring, close, complimentary, and co-orientated (Philippe & Seiler, 2006). Results from the interviews indicated similar perceptions of support from coaches. Caring, close, complimentary, and co-orientated interactions are all descriptions of a friend. Male and female athletes on the YSU Track

and Field team described how they preferred their coach to treat them like a friend. Student-athletes in this study liked when their coaches kept things light since it created less pressure. One of the athletes described his coach as being like his teammates. His coach would understand all his athletes on a personal level and would do the workouts with them. He said this motivated him. Previous research also connected coaches' social support to motivating athletes (Brann & Cranmer, 2015).

Athletes are more satisfied when their coach demonstrates investment/dedication to coaching. Athletes like when their coach is dedicating to knowing athletes personally. Results from this study also indicate that student-athletes are satisfied and likely to join the team when their coach treats them like friends during recruitment. Athletes were satisfied with their coaches' recruitment because their coach treated them like friends, which helped athletes decide to join the team. This aligns with the previous research findings that coaches are one of the primary reasons student-athletes come to their university (Conley, Downs, & Lombardi, 2012).

**Unconditional Support from Coaches.** Previous research suggests that socially supportive relationships between coaches and athletes are caring and close (Philippe & Seiler, 2006). However, past research did not explain how coaches may support athletes individually while caring for each athlete. Some athletes may feel supported since their coach selected them to care for and be close to, but may not care and be close to all their athletes. Female athletes in this study said their coaches were being biased, even when their coach favored them. The athletes read their coaches verbal and nonverbal communication cues to see if coaches were biased toward particular athletes. Past literature also suggests that athletes are more satisfied when they receive both verbal and

nonverbal support from their coach (Cranmer & Sollitto, 2015), but did not suggest coaches' cues to be biased to certain athletes. In this study, athletes also explained the coaches they perceived as unbiased. These coaches supported athletes even if their athletes were injured and not performing well. Female athletes perceived these coaches as having high communication competence and nonverbal immediacy. Male athletes mainly looked for coaches to go out of their way for athletes, which suggests that male athletes like when their coaches are dedicated to them. This also related to past research findings that athletes like when coaches show dedication to their job (Brann & Cranmer, 2015). However, previous research has not suggested coaches to show dedication to their jobs by going out of their way for athletes.

### **Research Question 2**

Athletes were asked to describe their coaches' communication, recruitment style, motivation, leadership, and support. Results indicate that men and women view their coaches differently in terms of trust in relationships and physical performances. Unlike the previous literature findings, I found that there is a gender difference between student-athletes' reasons for wanting or not wanting to be on the track and field team. Women look for unconditional support from coaches, whereas men look at their individual performance, injuries, and financial aid to figure out if they want to be on the team or not. Some females quit because of lack of improvement but they related this to not being able to work well with their coaches. Some males quit even though they were receiving a high amount of support from their coaches.

**Women's view of Support and Trust.** Female athletes feel more supported by their coaches when they trust their coach and vice-versa. Female athletes explained that

they were not motivated by their coaches because they felt that they could not trust their coaches. This aligns with previous findings that social support is positively correlated with satisfaction and motivation (Brann & Cranmer, 2015), however, previous research did not connect trust with support.

A couple student-athletes explained their coaches' leadership as dictatorships. They said their coach would not take anyone's input and seemed to try to push teammates apart rather than together. This is similar to previous research on verbal aggression. Studies define this as coaches' destructive communication which leads to psychological pain to athletes (Infante & Kassing, 1999). The athletes in this study also said, "it all comes down to your mental and physical strength." Previous literature also suggests athletes feel more supported with coach confirmation (Brann & Cranmer, 2015). This study results indicate a difference compared to the past research, since the athletes in this study do not trust that their coach truly agrees with them. Previous literature has not connected confirmation with power and fakeness. Athletes were dissatisfied when their coach acted fake and pretended to agree with them.

**Men's view of Communication and Physical Performances.** Women tended to talk about their interpersonal experiences with their coach's. Although some men looked at the interpersonal communication of coach's, other athletes mainly looked at their coach's communication about physical performances. Athletes' perceptions of their coach's communication and motivation usually relate. Previous research explains that coaches can alter their own communication competence by choosing how to motivate their athletes which may increase athletes' motivations (Buning & Thompson, 2015). However, a male athlete that perceived his coach's communication competence as high



and ability to motivate was low was not talking about his coach's interpersonal communication. He was describing his coach's physical and technical coaching.

Many male athletes mentioned how scholarships motivated them. Past research has looked into coach's communication competence as motivation (Buning & Thompson, 2015), rather than scholarships. Past studies indicate that athletes' motivation is likely to increase when their coach is clear, is direct, and praises athletes, and is likely to decrease when their coach avoids communication after an athletic performance. However, there was no evidence of coaches using scholarships to motivate players.

One athlete suggested his coach should be happier about athletes' accomplishments and make practice more enjoyable. Another athlete said he was satisfied with his coach's support because he made practice enjoyable. This aligns with previous research about reward power. Coaches' use of reward power may benefit the athletes' by giving them praise, recognition, and/or playing time (Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015). This can increase athletes' satisfaction with overall sport experiences. However, the results of this study indicated that these factors did not alter the men's decisions to quit. The first athlete quit since he did not receive a scholarship that he was promised and the second athlete quit because of an injury.

### **Current and Future Studies**

The limitations in this study included changes in student-athletes' perceptions of their coaches over time. This altered the results of the relation between student-athletes and coaches in terms of coaches' recruitment style, communication competence, leadership, ability to support their athletes, and ability to motivate their athletes. Other limitations include the small sample size of only 14 athletes and the focus on only one

sport. The small sample size limited the validity in quantitative results of this study. Therefore, the results were only qualitative in this study. Lastly, the nonverbal immediacy scale answers may change depending on the year or time student-athletes' think about their coach.

After analyzing the interview results, findings indicated a difference between male and female perceptions of their coach. These findings and quantitative research limitations altered the previous research questions and hypothesis. After reviewing previous research, I hypothesized that athletes' perceptions of their coaches' communication competence would positively correlate with coaches' ability to motivate, lead, support, and satisfy athletes. However, my sample size was too small to create a valid correlation. I also discovered a difference in the way women and men expressed their views of their coaches. In my experience as an athlete, I predicted some men to explain more about their dissatisfactions with their coaches' communication since they would complain during and after practices when they were on the team. However, they answered the questions in a simple and general way during the interviews.

I recommend including Tannen's genderlect theory into future research (Tannen, 1990). This is the theory that men and women tend to talk differently in conversation. Women tend to talk in a rapport style. This means they focus on connections and relationships. Men tend to speak like they are giving a report. Men often speak to show independence, to negotiate, and to gain or maintain their social status of their peers. This may explain why women in the interviews spoke more about their connection and relationship with their coaches and men talked more about their personal experience, such as physical performances and scholarships.

Overall, future researchers may broaden the variables and allow for different results by: (a) surveying and interviewing a larger sample of student-athlete alumni, (b) expanding outside of the Youngstown State University's Track and Field team, (c) finding and studying college track and field teams that have strong organizational communication practices or programs, (d) exploring deeper into the gender difference in athletes' perception of their coaches' communication. These findings can be compared to athletes' perceptions of their coaches' nonverbal communication and athletes' physical performances. Researchers may report findings to college athletic departments to help strengthen the communication between coaches and athletes. This may help bring in new athletes and alleviate athletes' dissatisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

This study explores experienced costs and benefits of athlete alumni and their perceptions of their coaches' recruitment style, communication competence, leadership, support, and ability to motivate athletes. I interviewed 7 male and 7 female athlete alumni that were on the Youngstown State University Track and Field team analyze their experiences. The results from the interviews suggest that women primarily look at unconditional support and trust from coaches and men mainly look at their individual performance, injuries, and financial aid as their costs and rewards. Both athletes are more satisfied when their coach treats them like a friend. Future researchers may want to explore coaches' nonverbal communication and athletes' performance more closely. Future research may look into the difference between male and female athletes' impact of their coaches. Lastly, future researchers may want to expand outside of the YSU Track and Field team to broaden the results and ensure the results are valid.

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## **Appendix A**

### 3 Demographic Questions

1. Which years were you on the track team?
2. When did you graduate?
3. What is your current occupation?

## Appendix B

### 26 Nonverbal Immediacy Questions

**DIRECTIONS:** The following statements describe the ways some people behave while talking with or to others. Please indicate in the space at the left of each item the degree to which you believe the statement applies to your main event coach in college. Please use the following 5-point scale:

**1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Occasionally; 4 = Often; 5 = Very Often**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. He/she uses her/his hands and arms to gesture while talking to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. He/she touches others on the shoulder or arm while talking to them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. He/she uses a monotone or dull voice while talking to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. He/she looks over or away from others while talking to them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. He/she moves away from others when they touch her/him while they are talking.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. He/she has a relaxed body position when he/she talks to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. He/she frowns while talking to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. He/she avoids eye contact while talking to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. He/she has a tense body position while talking to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. He/she sits close or stands close to people while talking with them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Her/his voice is monotonous or dull when he/she talks to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. He/she uses a variety of vocal expressions when he/she talks to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. He/she gestures when he/she talks to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. He/she is animated when he/she talk to people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. He/she has a bland facial expression when he/she talks to people.



- \_\_\_\_ 16. He/she moves closer to people when he/she talks to them.
- \_\_\_\_ 17. He/she looks directly at people while talking to them.
- \_\_\_\_ 18. He/she is stiff when he/she talks to people.
- \_\_\_\_ 19. He/she has a lot of vocal variety when he/she talks to people.
- \_\_\_\_ 20. He/she avoids gesturing while he/she is talking to people.
- \_\_\_\_ 21. He/she leans toward people when he/she talks to them.
- \_\_\_\_ 22. He/she maintains eye contact with people when he/she talks to them.
- \_\_\_\_ 23. He/she tries not to sit or stand close to people when he/she talks with them.
- \_\_\_\_ 24. He/she leans away from people when he/she talks to them.
- \_\_\_\_ 25. He/she smiles when he/she talks to people.
- \_\_\_\_ 26. He/she avoids touching people when he/she talks to them.

**Scoring:**

Step 1. Add the scores from the following items: 1, 2, 6, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, & 25.

Step 2. Add the scores from the following items: 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 15, 18, 20, 23, 24, & 26.

Total Score = 78 plus Step 1 minus Step 2.

**Norms:**

Females= Mean = 96.7 S.D. = 16.1 High = >112 Low = <81

Males= Mean = 91.6 S.D. = 15.0 High = >106 Low = <77

Combined= Mean = 94.2 S.D. = 15.6 High = >109 Low = <79

**Results in this study:**

Scores= 76, 72, 62, 89, 110, 97, 77, 76, 93, 114, 85, 102, 80, & 105

Mean= 88.42857

SD= 15.59938

## Appendix C

### The 5 open ended questions

**DIRECTIONS:** Answer the following questions while providing real examples of your experiences.

1. Please describe your coach's recruitment style. Include examples.
2. Please describe your coach's communication.
3. Please describe how your coach motivated student-athletes.
4. Please describe your coach's overall leadership style.
5. Thinking about your coach's communication with you, did you feel supported and satisfied? Why or why not?

## **Appendix D**

### IRB Approval Letter

Dear investigators,

Your protocol entitled Recruitment, Communication Competence, Motivation, Leadership, and Support in College Coach-Athlete Relationships has been reviewed. Your protocol has been determined to meet the criteria of an exempt protocol, category #3. You will be conducting an open-ended and close-ended question interview via phone. Recruiting will occur through Facebook. You will keep the names of the participants confidential.

Your protocol is approved. You can begin the research immediately. You will receive a letter of approval in a few days from the IRB. Please reference protocol #023-18 in all correspondence.

Best.

Karen H. Larwin, Ph.D.