# Athlete-Centred Coaching in University Sport: A Foucauldian Analysis

By

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**Abstract**

Athlete-centred coaching is a relatively recent development in sport psychology which aims to empower athletes in an effort to improve their engagement, decision making skills, and performance (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002). While research emerging from youth sport and recreational settings supports the efficacy of this approach, there is little literature investigating how athlete-centred coaching is understood and utilized in high-performance sport.

Informed by sociocultural research demonstrating the potential negative consequences of disciplinary coaching approaches which are common in high-performance sport (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Shogan, 2007), I investigated how, and to what extent, athlete-centred coaching was utilized in a university sport context by interviewing eight varsity head coaches. Located within the poststructuralist paradigm, I drew from the work of Michel Foucault (1995) and his analysis of discipline in an attempt to answer the following questions: In what specific ways do varsity coaches understand and implement athlete-centred coaching approaches? In what ways, if at all, do these specific practices depart from sport's long-standing disciplinary framework? What difficulties or challenges do coaches face in attempting to implement athlete-centred approaches across the varying contexts of a university sport season?

My findings suggested that the successful delivery of athlete-centred coaching in university sport is made difficult by ingrained power relations and forms of knowledge which have traditionally made the coach the primary decision maker. While coaches acknowledged the potential benefits of athlete empowerment, they struggled to successfully implement this approach because of such factors as the pressure to win and

the need to coach individuals differently within the team structure. As a result, they frequently reverted to more traditional, disciplinary coaching tactics. Situations where coaches were more comfortable empowering their athletes included contexts away from the playing field such as setting team rules, electing captains, and policing the locker room. However when using athlete-centred coaching on the playing field, particularly when stakes increased and the pressure to perform was highest, coaches felt the need to take back control from their athletes to ensure a positive competitive outcome. Ultimately, this pressure to perform compromised the use of athlete-centred coaching tactics in this context.

Despite the proposed benefits of athlete-centred coaching, my study provides evidence of the assertion made by Denison, Mills, and Konoval (2017) that athlete-centred coaching and other athlete empowerment initiatives do not sufficiently differ from traditional forms of coaching, and are largely rhetoric rather than true philosophies. Coaches used athlete-centred approaches as a tool to foster athlete engagement or increase motivation, rather than as an underlying philosophy informing every decision. While the intention of these approaches is to address a range of problems in sport, because they do not consider sport's strong disciplinary legacy any claims they make for positive change are more often than not superficial. Based on my results I recommend a continued exploration of the ways in which social theory, and particularly the use of Foucault, can inform coaching knowledges in striving for effective and ethical practice. By carefully considering the problematic effects of discipline in making coaching decisions, coaches can take real steps towards encouraging athlete-empowerment.

## Preface

This thesis is an original work by Geoffrey Pippus. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Athlete-Centred Coaching in University Sport: A Foucauldian Analysis", Pro00086815, January 17th, 2019.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As prominent figures in the delivery of sport at the university level, varsity coaches carry tremendous influence and responsibility in shaping the experiences of student-athletes. In an environment where education and sport-performance co-exist, coaching practices are shaped by a need to contribute to individual athlete's development not only as athletic performers, but as teammates, students, and people. A coach must navigate the potentially complicated implementation of practices which address these pressures by balancing a focus on individual development and a need to achieve a winning result. While academic literature has identified several varying approaches to coaching, which are the focus of this thesis, my own understanding of coaching practices originates from my different experiences as a varsity basketball player at two different universities.

At the University of British Columbia and as an 18 year- old fresh out of high school, my introduction to University athletics was overwhelming. While initially I aspired to succeed on the court and even dreamed of a professional career as a player, the day to day reality of university basketball felt more like a physically and emotionally taxing job than a way to pursue my passion. For three seasons, I did my best to fit into a strictly controlled program under the impression that fitting in would ultimately lead to my success. I was a shell of myself by my third year in the program. My desire to play gradually declined and by the end I dreaded the mandatory practices and workouts. Rather than the engaged, eager, and confident player I was when I came out of high school, I was a player terrified to make mistakes. I no longer came to practice wanting to learn and improve, all I wanted was to make it through practice without being punished.

I was afraid of my coach, who felt like a dictator to whom I was accountable at all times. I underperformed academically, rarely attending classes in an attempt to conserve energy. I was exhausted, felt demeaned by constant negative feedback from my coach, and defeated by the seemingly endless scheduling demands. Ultimately, I quit the team to pursue my academic and social interests.

Leaving the scripted world of university athletics was a liberating feeling which improved my mental health, social life, and academic performance. Interestingly, almost immediately I sought out other ways to be involved in basketball, through coaching and playing recreationally. It was obvious to me that basketball wasn't the problem— it was the context of my university sport experience which drove me away from varsity competition. I played for fun at every possible opportunity and was actively involved in coaching local youth. Despite a profoundly negative experience as a player at UBC, I loved basketball and couldn't imagine life without being involved in the game.

After two years as a full-time student my academic performance had improved enough to make graduate school a possibility. My desire to pursue my university basketball career was renewed, bolstered by my positive experiences and career aspirations as a coach. My feelings towards playing again were entirely different from my early playing career. I worked diligently to hone my skills and get into playing shape, but this type of work felt different than my time at UBC. I set my own schedule, was my own coach, and felt empowered to strive to play my best.

In the Fall of 2016 I began graduate school at the University of Alberta and joined the Golden Bears basketball team as a more mature player and person than I had been during my three years playing at UBC. My path was much different than most of my

teammates. Unlike the typical high school recruit who is approached by schools, I contacted head coach Barnaby Craddock myself about the potential to join the program. I was forthcoming about the circumstances of my decision to leave the UBC program, and initially asked for any chance to be a part of the program, whether playing or coaching. My relationship with Coach Craddock felt like a partnership from the beginning, which was a considerable departure from what I had come to know at UBC. Several times throughout the year, Coach solicited my opinion about important team decisions. He encouraged me to expand my skillset on the court and take an active leadership role in mentoring younger players. I felt involved and engaged in both my own and the team's development and enjoyed both individual and team success.

Coming to the U of A with a second chance to be a student-athlete reinforced my curiosity about coaching both experientially and academically. I wanted to understand why my experience at UBC was so different than at Alberta. Clearly, my coach had more trust in me and was more actively involved in my development. But was this just a product of being older and a better player? If I had a trusting partnership with my coach at UBC, even as a young, developing player, how would my experience have changed? What else contributed to the two totally different experiences?

My transition into graduate school provided me an opportunity to attempt to answer these questions as I was introduced to academic approaches to sport coaching and new frameworks which aim to optimize athletes' sporting experiences. The emergence of these new alternatives to more traditional, "old school" methods of sport coaching depart from the measurement of sporting success as merely competitive results in favour of a more wide-ranging conceptualization of the athlete's long-term development, both

on and off of the playing field (Kidman & Lombardo 2010; Lombardo, 1999; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Athlete-centred coaching has emerged as a framework intended to improve an athlete's ability to problem-solve, analyze, and make decisions by promoting athlete autonomy (Lombardo, 1999). Through this approach, athlete-centred coaching attempts to optimize not only the physical performance abilities of athletes, but also attempts to maximize their psychological, cognitive, and social development through sport participation (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002). My introduction to athlete-centred coaching as a potentially beneficial, holistic alternative to the negative aspects of sport I experienced both as a player and in my studies was the motivating factor behind this research project. I was intrigued by the potential for athlete-centredness to explain the differences in my own experience as a player. Could this framework positively affect the experiences of other university athletes?

Despite my optimism and intrigue about the potential benefits of the athlete-centred approach, further reflection on my more positive experience at the University of Alberta left me with even more questions. Was my coach really athlete-centred, or was my experience as an older player and a more mature person a more significant factor in improving my situation? Were the empowering practices Coach Craddock used, such as consulting me on important team decisions, intentionally athlete-centred or just a by-product of my position as an older leader on the team? Did coach treat all of his players this way?

I also noted that despite the benefits of involving players throughout the year, these opportunities seemed to disappear when the pressure to win was highest. In my final year as a player at the U of A, we performed exceptionally well during the regular

season and entered the playoffs as favourites to win our conference and contend for the national championship. Despite feeling empowered and involved in the time leading up to the playoffs, practices and decisions became more controlled and disciplined as time drew closer to the national tournament. I began to feel less like a confident and engaged veteran and more like a down in the dumps rookie again. Even within my time at the U of A, my experience as an athlete changed drastically dependent on the context. Were these intentional coaching decisions? Could my coach have counterbalanced the mounting pressure to win more effectively by utilizing more athlete-centred practices?

Although psychology scholarship has touted athlete-centred approaches as a form of "best-practice," other researchers in the field of sport sociology have problematized athlete-centred approaches as rhetoric which does not completely address the many unintended consequences attributed to coaching's historical development as highly disciplinary (Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2017). Scholars like Jones (2006) and Nelson, Cushion, Potrac, and Groom (2014) have critiqued athlete-centredness by suggesting that while learner-centred approaches are potentially beneficial pedagogical techniques, the complex realities of coaching practices make implementation difficult. In these contexts where athletes are closely controlled and monitored (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Shogan, 2007) emphasizing autonomy and decision making is challenging. In the face of these difficulties, is it possible for coaches to successfully employ a truly athlete-centred philosophy?

Fuelled by my own curiosity about how my own playing experiences were so vastly different, the differing narratives of coaching's developmental effects is central to the purpose of this thesis. While, ultimately, I didn't believe that the intentional use of

athlete-centred practice was the fundamental difference between my two playing experiences, I was curious to investigate the complications of both my own experience and the coaching-sociology literature in order to gain a more complete understanding of the complex social setting of sport coaching. In doing so, I hoped to address the extent to which athlete-centred coaching was a real alternative to the more old-school approaches detailed in sport sociology literature (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Shogan, 2007).

Denison, Mills and Konoval (2017) utilized the social theory of Michel Foucault to problematize modern coaching conceptualizations and the proposed solutions of athlete-centred initiatives. While their work established the entrance of athlete-centred coaching and empowerment into the common coaching discourse, this thesis builds on the critiques of Denison et al. (2017) by critically examining the understanding and actionable implementation of athlete-centredness by varsity coaches at the university level. While considerable literature exists supporting the athlete centred approach in developmental environments and youth sport (Gould et al. 2007; Light, 2002; Romar et. al., 2016; Turnnidge et al., 2007), the implementation of such an approach has received less attention in high-performance sporting contexts where external pressures, for instance the need to win to ensure job security, are far greater. While athlete-centred coaching has been presented as a potentially beneficial alternative to old-school coaching, I wanted to find out whether it was possible for this approach to truly depart from the highly disciplinary environment of high-performance sport.

Through interviews with university coaches and utilizing a Foucauldian conceptualization of discipline, I addressed several important questions related to the implementation of athlete-centred coaching by coaches in varsity sport at the university

level: In what specific ways through actionable practice do coaches understand and implement athlete-centred approaches? How do these specific practices depart from the problematic disciplinary framework of high-performance sport? What difficulties or pressures do coaches face in attempting to implement athlete-centred approaches in the varying contexts of the university sport season?

In the following chapter, I present the framework with which I investigated these questions. I begin by reviewing the existing literature supporting the athlete-centred approach as an alternative to traditional coaching approaches. I also present literature in the field of coaching sociology which problematizes the broader disciplinary framework of high-performance sport. By highlighting the differences between these two bodies of research, I identify a gap in the current academic understanding of when and how athlete-centred approaches are utilized by successful coaches in high-performance sport environments, namely university sport. I then transition into my methodology section, describing my poststructuralist paradigmatic approach, specific interview methods, and the research ethics process.

Following my methodology chapter, I present the results of my interviews with eight university team sport head coaches. I discuss in depth the three themes which were most clearly identified by these coaches: How coaches learn and understand athlete-centred coaching, how coaches use athlete-centred coaching to empower athletes away from the playing field, and how coaches utilize athlete-centred coaching across various contexts on the playing field. Drawing on Foucault's work on discipline, I critically analyze the ways in which coaches do, and perhaps more importantly do not, successfully implement an athlete-centred philosophy.

By examining the complexities and difficulties of utilizing a potentially liberating and empowering framework in a particularly disciplinary and restrictive setting, I hope to provide coaches and researchers the opportunity to develop more informed and effective coaching practices.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

This chapter highlights the inconsistencies between two bodies of literature: sport sociology research which problematizes high-performance sport coaching as disciplinary, and sport psychology research which positions athlete-centred coaching as liberating, conducive to optimizing performance, and a form of best practice. At face value, the contradictions and potential incompatibility between these two research narratives suggest that athlete-centred coaching in high-performance sport is exceptionally difficult to implement.

While I do not suggest that athlete-centred coaching is impossible in high-performance sport, I identify the tension between sports psychology and sport sociology literature in this chapter in order to explore the problem of athlete-centred coaching in an often restrictive and disciplinary context. Through this process, my purpose is to clarify the ways in which athlete-centred coaching is, or perhaps more importantly is not understood and implemented by coaches in high-performance sport settings. Importantly, while the effects of these practices on athletes is an interesting phenomenon worthy of study, my focus is on how coaches articulate their knowledge and implementation of athlete-empowerment initiatives. This inquiry specifically investigates the ways in which athlete-centredness is evident in daily practice in order to discern whether such empowerment initiatives are actually imposed at an interactional level, or are merely broad goals that may not be specifically addressed in coaching practice. Ultimately, by gaining a better understanding of the reality of athlete-centred approaches at the university level, my study provides researchers and coach practitioners with the ability to

shape more informed and reflective practices to counteract the potentially harmful effects of disciplinary coaching, and benefit both athletes' experiences and performances.

I begin by tracing the development of traditional coaching approaches through a review of the sport psychology research concerning the optimization of sport performance. While early sport psychology literature aimed to predict and enhance performance, more recent research utilizes behavioural studies in attempting to empirically demonstrate that athlete-centred approaches contribute to better long-term outcomes, in both performance and experience, than 'old-school' coaching approaches. After presenting literature supporting athlete-centredness as a viable alternative to traditional coaching approaches, I review the Foucauldian-informed sport sociology literature that problematizes high-performance sport more broadly. This research suggests that the structure of sport coaching carries potential unintended consequences that may detract from athletes' experiences and performances in sport. Through the competing narratives of these two bodies of literature, I justify the need to investigate how and why athlete-centred approaches are currently understood and implemented by coaches in the complex context of university sport. While proponents of athlete-centred coaching suggest that it can empower and engage athletes, I begin to address the lack of research demonstrating its efficacy in high-performance environments which are traditionally restrictive and disciplinary. In doing so, I assess the specific ways in which the implementation of athlete-centred coaching is successful, and unsuccessful in this context in attempting to inform future coaching practice which considers the disciplinary tradition of high-performance sport.

**Defining Performance: Sport Psychology and "Old School" Coaching**

The development of academic discussion surrounding coaching practices can be traced through sport psychology research related to definitions and optimization of performance. Traditionally, excellence in sport has been measured through performance outcome measures such as medals and world records. Early sports psychology research addressed this emphasis, as the primary focus of study was the use of personality traits as predictors of performance excellence, defined as observable, measurable athletic outcomes (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

As sports psychology continued to develop, research on sport performance outcomes continued into the 1980's as 'mental-skills training' utilized to develop cognitive and behavioural skills thought to increase athletic performance. These interventions, such as visualization, hypnosis, and relaxation represented a continued narrow focus on the potential to control and regulate athletic performance (Miller & Kerr, 2002). This research reflected the pursuit of excellence on the playing field as sport psychology began to inform practices in and around coaching. While these advances in the pursuit of performance continued, little research dealt with outcomes and effects of athletic participation outside of the playing arena. A shift in the discipline occurred in the 1990's, however, when researchers and practitioners began to consider success in athletics more broadly, valuing not only results on the playing field, but also the broader development of individual athletes.

During this shift, researchers began to acknowledge the limitations and potentially negative consequences of a narrow focus on performance measures (Miller & Kerr, 2002). The significant pressures to achieve athletic performance excellence can

come at the expense of well-rounded intellectual, social, and emotional development, or what Miller and Kerr (2002) defined as "personal excellence". Adler and Adler (1985, 1987, 1991) for instance, found that for NCAA Division I men's basketball players fatigue, insufficient time for studying, and pressures from coaches contributed to academic disinterest and failure. As researchers produced evidence suggesting that a narrow focus on athletic "performance excellence" had detrimental implications for the overall healthy development of individual athletes, new approaches began to address the athletic experience by taking a more holistic, well-rounded style (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Shifts in approach towards more holistic administration of sport occurred at institutional levels such as universities where athletic programs began to implement counselling and academic programs to counteract the negative implications of high-performance sport participation (Miller & Kerr, 2002). The attitudinal shift towards a more holistic and long-term development of athletes also occurred in the specific realm of sport coaching. Traditional forms of coaching fuelled by the measurement of performance outcomes closely resembled what researchers called "coach-centred" approaches to coaching (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010).

In high-performance sport a coach's job security can rest on the fulfillment of certain performance objectives, which often require winning. In attempting to maximize performance measures, the traditional leadership style of coaches can exploit the power incumbent in their position to take choice and control away from the athlete (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Kidman and Lombardo (2010), defined this leadership style as follows.

> Although coaching today encompasses a wide variety of approaches, the traditional leadership style has given coaches a license to 'exploit' their power by taking the choice and control away from the athlete, especially when winning is the only focus. When a coach takes total control and athletes have basically no say, the approach is *coach-centred* [emphasis in the original]. This approach tends to be prescriptive. Sometimes it has been identified, mistakenly, as an important element in coaching success. (p. 14)

Despite "must-win" environments contributing to coach-centred approaches wherein the coach feels the need to take control in order to ensure winning, such approaches can be counterproductive. By disempowering the athlete, coach-centred approaches can contradict why many athletes participate in sport (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). By focusing entirely on winning, a coach-centred coach fails to account for other conceptualizations of success which involve a mutual relationship with the athlete, such as achievement of personal goals, or development of long term habits and involvement in sport (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010).

Similarly, Lombardo (1999) posited a need to restructure the sport system due to the dominance of the "Professional Model of Coaching" which limits attention to athlete development especially in environments such as youth, high school, and university sport. Lombardo suggested that coaching behaviour developed similarly to behaviourally restrictive social structures of the 1950's and 60's, such as religious and educational systems and the legal system (Lombardo, 1999). Through this development, coaching behaviour evolved to mimic the authoritative non-permissive, and restrictive values of society at the time. Under the traditional values of the professional model of coaching,

young athletes of today are faced with unfamiliar circumstances wherein the adults make all of the meaningful decisions and individual decision making is devalued or policed (Lombardo, 1999).

An emphasis on performance measures as evidence of successful sport outcomes is reflected in practices wherein a coach strictly controls behaviour through exerting his or her own influence in attempting to ensure winning (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Despite the common belief that sport participation contributes to developmental benefits and thereby is inherently positive, research has shown that the potential benefits of sport participation are context dependent (Coakley, 2016; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Weiss, 2016). In particular, researchers (Adler & Adler 1985, 1987, 1989; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Lombardo, 1999; Miller & Kerr, 2002) have identified that when coach-centred performance goals such as winning or motor proficiency are overemphasized, the potentially beneficial outcomes of sport can be diminished. The potentially negative impact of the professional model of coaching on athlete experience and decision making is particularly counterintuitive in contexts such as youth, high school, or university sport where pressure to win is coupled with developmental goals of sport participation.

My own experience as an athlete at UBC closely resembled the negative aspects of coaching evident in sports psychology of traditional, "old-school" coaching practices. While winning was certainly at the forefront of my consciousness, it was not the only reason I participated in sport. I wanted to learn more about basketball and find out how good a player I could become, a process which required making mistakes and pushing my boundaries. I wanted to be an integral part of the team, take a leadership role, and contribute to making decisions and shaping the team identity. My coach, however,

prioritized winning at all costs. Mistakes were not tolerated and could result in being singled-out and embarrassed. When I approached the coach and expressed concerns about the team, I was told that if I didn't like his style of leadership that I was welcome to leave. Ultimately, my frustrations and burnout were overwhelming and I quit the team.

In an attempt to address the problems with "old-school" coaching, athlete-centred, or humanistic coaching, has emerged as an alternative posited to be more beneficial than traditional coach-centred approaches. By intentionally empowering athletes and promoting decision making and athlete engagement, proponents of this framework suggest that athlete-centred coaching can improve not only athletes' experiences and development, but also their sport performance.

**What is Athlete-Centred Coaching?**

The athlete-centred sport model is a holistic approach to sport participation and athlete development which promotes the long-term development of an athlete's ability to analyze, problem solve, and make decisions (Lombardo, 1999). The term "athlete-centred" is closely related to several other emergent conceptualizations of this behaviour, including "autonomy-supportive" and "humanistic" approaches to leadership and coaching. Humanistic, autonomy supportive, and athlete-centred coaches encourage athletes to become self-aware and self-sufficient, facilitating learning rather than strictly dictating and controlling behaviour (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Through this model, the athlete-centred approach attempts to optimize the potential physical, cognitive, psychological, and social benefits of sport participation (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002). By shifting measurements of success from performance outcome measures to an emphasis on personal excellence, athlete-centred coaching aims to

facilitate positive experiences in sport, which contribute to well-rounded long term developmental outcomes for participants.

Of particular interest to this thesis, Miller and Kerr (2002) noted that athlete-centred approaches should extend beyond developmental youth level programs and that even the elite youth athlete should be encouraged to assume responsibility for health behaviours. Additionally, athletes should actively engage in critical reflection of practice and performance, and the development of independent thinking and self-reliance (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Importantly, proponents of athlete-centred coaching also suggest that while this approach departs from the "must-win" attitude of traditional, coach-centred approaches, athlete-centred coaching is more likely to produce more successful performance-based outcomes. Given the focus of this research project on university level athletics, this particular application of the athlete-centred approach to high level competition is significant.

Athlete-centred proponents suggest that this approach could help to prevent negative experiences in sport, like my own at UBC, while also contributing to better athletic performances. However, while this theoretical "best practice" is well intentioned, it is necessary to critically examine the practical implementation of athlete-centredness in order to identify the real-world consequences of such an approach. In the next section I will review the current literature related to the specific implementation and practice of athlete-centred coaching.

**Athlete-centred Coaching in Sports Today**

A significant portion of the current literature emerging from studies of athlete-centred coaching is situated in the realm of youth sports. This trend could be attributed to

the conceptualizations of successful performance highlighted by Miller and Kerr (2002), as youth sport has considerably less emphasis on and pressure to produce performance measures, such as winning, than higher levels of competition, such as university or professional sport. Furthermore, the developmental focus of athlete-centred approaches aligns with the pervading belief that youth sport can be beneficial for long term development (Coakley, 2016; Weiss, 2016).

A particular field of sport psychology research which provides considerable empirical investigation of athlete-centred approaches is Positive Youth Development (PYD) in sport. PYD emphasizes the importance of the context surrounding youth development in order to treat young athletes as assets to be developed through the facilitation of a healthy learning environment. Emerging from the field of positive psychology, PYD posits that programs which foster an environment conducive to long term athlete development both on and off of the playing field (often in part through coaching practices which are athlete-centred) produce long term outcomes superior to other approaches (Weiss, 2016). While this thesis is not a study of PYD, the literature emerging from this field can be used to gain insight into the specific applications of athlete-centred coaching in youth sport, as long as these practices are demonstrably within the athlete-centred approach.

Interestingly, one variable utilized by researchers to promote athlete-centred approaches is elevated performance outcomes which are linked to increased athlete investment, autonomy, and the ability to make decisions (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Lyle, 2002; Miller & Kerr, 2002). One study emerging from the youth sport literature, utilizing high-performance outcome variables as a means of advocating athlete-centred

approaches, was completed by Gould, Collins, Lauer and Chung (2007) and investigated the approaches utilized by award winning high school football coaches in teaching life skills.

Gould et al. (2007) conducted interviews of 10 high school coaches characterized as outstanding through an average winning percentage of 76.6% and an average of 31 years of coaching experience in addition to having won or been selected as finalists of the NFL's High School Coach of the Year program. These coaches were specifically and intentionally identified as individuals who achieved high-performance outcomes, while also implementing practices intended to develop life skills outside of the playing field. Several athlete-centred practices were identified in these coaches' approaches to facilitating life skill development in their athletes. Relationships with players and open communication, key athlete-centred approaches identified by Miller and Kerr (2002), were identified as important factors in developing a shared feeling of ownership and investment in athletes (Gould et al. 2007). Several themes identified from the broader emphasis of relationship development between the players and coaches further demonstrated how athlete-centred approaches were actualized in their practical implementation. Among these, Gould et al. (2007) highlighted the practice of reprimanding players while protecting their self-worth as a means of enforcing accountability while maintaining the coach-athlete relationship, an important balance in maintaining an athlete-centred approach. Another athlete-centred approach identified by these highly successful coaches was goal setting, creating and reinforcing a shared sense of ownership in empowering athletes and enabling athlete decision making (Gould et al., 2007). The identification of these athlete-centred practices in contributing to a traditional

performance-centred conceptualization of success is intended to highlight the efficacy of athlete-centredness as a whole. While athlete-centredness emphasizes enabling athletes and long-term development, this research suggests that the approach should also contribute to winning and on-field success in youth sport.

Another example of the athlete-centred approach emerging from PYD research is evident in Turnnidge, Evans, Vierimaa, Allan and Côté's (2016) discussion of transformational leadership in youth sport. Transformational leadership focuses on the interpersonal relationships between athletes and coaches as a means of promoting positive sport experiences such as higher levels of performance, lifelong participation in sport, and personal development such as psychosocial outcomes, social interactions, and the development of character (Turnnidge et al., 2016). This research proposes a correlation between the athlete-centred approach of transformational leadership and positive long-term sport experience outcomes. Transformational leadership theory represents a "follower-centred conceptualization of leadership" which facilitates growth through "developing person-centred relationships that empower, inspire, and challenge followers" (Turnnidge et al., 2016, p. 139-140). This form of leadership closely parallels athlete-centred approaches to coaching, particularly given its emphases on autonomy support, athlete choice, individualized consideration, and long term well being.

Researchers studying the implementation of transformational leadership theory demonstrate several long-term benefits to this approach. Charbonneau, Barling, and Kelloway (2001) linked transformational leadership with increased intrinsic motivation and sport performance in university athletes. Stenling and Tafvelin (2014) linked transformational leadership with competence, autonomy, and relatedness (three concepts

pivotal to athlete-centred coaching) as mediating variables contributing to overall well-being in competitive floorball players in northern Sweden. By doing so, these researchers further highlight the link between athlete-centredness and traditional performance measures of success.

Similarly, Mageau and Vallerand (2003) utilized sport psychology research in the realm of autonomy supportive leadership in proposing a model operationalizing the benefits of athlete-centred and autonomy centred coaching with respect to athlete motivation. According to the model, a leader's autonomy-supportive behaviours are mediated by athletes' perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in determining an athlete's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In the study, autonomy supportive behaviours are broadly referred to as taking the athletes' perspective and acknowledging their feelings, encouraging choice and independent problem solving while minimizing pressures and demands (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Furthermore, athletes in an autonomy supportive system are "regarded as individuals deserving self-determination, and not mere pawns that should be controlled to obtain a certain outcome" (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003, p. 886).

Mageau and Vallerand (2003) provided a thorough review of empirical evidence which linked specific autonomy supportive behaviours with enhanced intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivation. These behaviours include providing choice within specific rules and limits, providing a rationale for tasks and limits, acknowledging the others feelings and perspectives, providing athletes with opportunities for initiative taking and independent work, providing non-controlling competence feedback, and avoiding controlling behaviours (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). This research provided another

empirical link between specific athlete-centred approaches to leadership and the positive outcomes touted by researchers such as Kidman and Lombardo (2010) in positioning athlete-centredness as a best-practice, superior to traditional coaching and leadership styles.

Romar, Saren, and Hastie (2016) provided another iteration of the institution of athlete-centred coaching in their study of the implementation of the Sport Education model with a team of 23 youth soccer players aged 10-11 in Finland. The Sport Education model intentionally increases athlete identification and affiliation within the team setting, ensuring athlete responsibility by assigning team roles such as coach, referee, manager, trainer, and statistician to players throughout the course of the season. Four themes identified through this analysis were provided as evidence of the efficacy of the athlete-centred sport education model. Athlete autonomy was demonstrated to be fostered through the assumption of leadership and decision-making responsibility to the extent that coaches continued the implementation of player led warm-ups after the completion of the intervention. Additionally, Romar et al. (2016) highlighted increased team cohesion and affiliation, a player driven intensification of competition, and enthusiastic embrace of assigned roles as positive outcomes resulting from the implementation of the Sport Education model.

While the positive outcomes associated with the Sport Education model lend to the efficacy of athlete-centredness in positively influencing athlete experience, this approach may also illuminate potential problems with athlete-centredness at more competitive levels. In my own experience as a university athlete, assigning players different roles would be seen as radical. While there may be demonstrable benefits to the

Sport Education model in youth sport, the implementation of such an approach at a highly competitive level would be convoluted by the context specific expectations of coaching behaviour.

A similar iteration of the implementation of athlete-centred coaching emerging from sport education at the youth level is the "Teaching Games for Understanding" (TGfU) model originally discussed by Bunker and Thorpe (1982) but identified in the athlete-centred literature by Kidman and Lombardo (2010). TGfU allows athletes to develop and hone skills within a game setting which differs significantly from the skill-development contexts of coach-centred environments wherein constant feedback from coaches can create clutter and hamper problem solving abilities (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Different iterations of this strategy, including "Play Practice" and "Game Sense", utilize learning through enquiry and game play rather than more scripted traditional practice sessions (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Pill, 2006).

The typical structure of an athlete-centred TGfU session involves guidance by the coach or instructor in order to facilitate analysis and critical reflection of physical activity by the group of athletes (Light, 2002). Pill (2006), instructed coaches to move their thinking from the skills of the game to the facilitation of athlete knowledge by emphasizing "the nature of the game and the understanding of the game to be developed through a game-question-reflect-practice if appropriate- game cycle" (p. 3). Rather than dictating specific approaches to a skill, coaches utilizing the TGfU approach posed key questions and "guided discovery" that was meant to facilitate critical thinking and problem solving by the athlete (Pill, 2006). Light (2002) introduced TGfU to teacher education students of varying educational backgrounds as a part of a broader longitudinal

study of innovation in PE. These students' accounts of their experiences as learners in a TGfU basketball session represent the potential benefits of TGfU and athlete-centred coaching as a whole. The students became more engaged and less reluctant to be involved in game-play, interacted more with their teammates, and became more active and engaged physically, affectively, and cognitively (Light, 2002). Light proposed that this increased engagement and enjoyment through TGfU is due in part to "the reduction in skill demands, the development of understanding and the increased verbal and bodily interaction" (p. 291). Once again, the highlighted benefits of athlete-centredness in educational settings paint a promising picture of the potential for this approach to positively affect individual experiences in athletics. However, this encouraging literature in the realm of youth sport and education does not necessarily indicate how such an approach could be actualized in highly competitive sport environments such as university sport.

**Athlete-Centred Coaching Outside of Youth Sport and Education**

While I've presented considerable empirical support emerging from sports psychology research for athlete-centred approaches in educational and youth sport environments, there is significantly less research related to the specific implementation of athlete-centred approaches in professional sport. Bennie and O'Connor (2010) investigated coaching philosophies in professional rugby and cricket leagues in Australia, ultimately finding that holistic approaches to coaching, which emphasized the total development of the person, were stated as priorities for top level coaches. However, while the identification of athlete-centred intentionality in coaching philosophy is valuable, there is little research investigating how this philosophy is translated into

action. Without research demonstrating the specifics of athlete-centred coaching in high-performance environments, it is difficult to appraise whether the approach is an effective means to address concerns with traditional coaching or is merely rhetoric.

The need for further investigation of specific behaviours and actions related to the delivery of athlete-centred approaches is apparent throughout several of the studies presented in this review. Holt, Deal, and Smyth (2016) suggested that future directions of PYD research need to investigate specific interventions in order to more completely understand how sport programs work, "under what circumstances, for whom, and the mechanisms that produce or limit the attainment of positive developmental outcomes" (p. 229). In a thorough review of the game centred (i.e. TGfU and the Sport Education model) approach literature since 2006, Harvey and Jarrett (2013) found limited investigations exploring the challenges coaches face in implementing new coaching practices. Much of the TGfU research is focused on the technical and tactical aspects of the game and underemphasizes cognitive and affective implications of this approach (Holt, Strean, & Bengoechea, 2002). Given the varied and complicated contexts involved in sport, and in particular university sport, this lack of literature demands further examination. Additionally, little research has investigated the specific application of game-centred approaches in coaching specifically, as most research regarding this athlete-centred approach has occurred in the realm of physical education (Cushion, 2013; Harvey & Jarrett, 2013).

Athlete-centred coaching proposes to counter the negative effects of traditional, "old-school" coaching styles by increasing athlete autonomy and encouraging independent decision-making. However, even researchers within the field of sports

psychology have identified potential difficulties in implementing such an approach. Miller and Kerr (2002) emphasized the need for organizational synergy in actualizing an athlete-centred athletic environment. Such synergy might include the employment of athlete advocates or mentors charged with protecting the rights and needs of athletes, or through "well-planned and monitored training programs, regular assessments of athletes' health, use of sport science support staff, protection of athletes' rights, and a keen awareness of athletes' needs at any given time" (p. 147). Coaches, moreover, need to ensure the implementation of such structural traits in addition to developing a working partnership with the athlete conducive to "open communication, shared goal-setting and collaborative decision-making" (p. 147). Given the diversity of different contexts, for instance from university to university, it is apparent that these institutional factors may not be easily addressed in all settings. For example, in a university basketball setting such as what I experienced at UBC and the U of A, resources such as sport science support staff and regular assessments of athletes' health were unavailable. Miller and Kerr's statement that there is a need for a "keen awareness of athletes' needs at any given time" is most difficult to account for in complex social settings like those I experienced in my own athletic career.

The necessity for organizational synergy further highlights the need for a more complete picture as to the real-life implementation of athlete-centred practice in high-performance sport. Kidman and Lombardo (2010) identified several other problematic factors with respect to the successful introduction of an athlete-centred philosophy, including the coach's ego, the expectations of society or the media, time constraints, or the win at all costs mentality of the Professional Model of Sport (Lombardo, 1999).

While the concept of athlete-centredness is often presented as a straight forward means of improving athlete performance as well as experience, it is clear that the social nature of coaching complicates the delivery of such an approach. These complications can make the effective delivery of athlete-centred coaching even more difficult in traditionally disciplinary contexts like university sport.

**Coaching Sociology and Athlete-centred Coaching**

The primary development of coaching science research has occurred along post-positivist lines in the realm of sport psychology "with emphasis on the principles that underpin the physiological, technical, and tactical development of the athlete" (Potrac, Brewer, Jones, Armour, & Hoff, 2000). Despite the productivity of sport psychology in improving athletic performance, researchers in the field of coaching sociology have highlighted issues that previously had not been addressed. Coaching is not merely a technical transfer of knowledge from coach to athlete, but is a social process highly dependent on context, and complicated by interpersonal relationships and power relations (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac., 2009; Cushion et al., 2012; Cushion, 2013; Potrac et al., 2000). Within these contexts, coaches and athletes navigate social expectations which affect their choices and interactions. While sports psychology provides valuable insight in predicting athletic performance and informing coaching practice, it can neglect other important aspects of coaching such as discourse, power, and context.

How coaches and athletes navigate their respective roles is fundamental in affecting athletic experience and performance. However, coaching sociologists have pointed out that there was little research investigating the specifics of these social interactions until the late 1990's (Potrac et al., 2000). More recent literature has shed

light on the problematic pedagogical formation of coaching practice, suggesting that the hierarchical coach-athlete relationship is seen as "common sense" and is largely learned from experience (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009). Cushion, Armour, and Jones (2003) suggested that young coaches gained cultural understanding of coaching practice primarily through observation, as either players themselves or as an unofficial apprentice in lesser coaching roles. However, when the roles of coach and athlete are assumed uncritically, "the coach-athlete relationship is characterized by rank and power, with one party perceived as having knowledge, and the other as needing it" (Cassidy et al., 2009, p. 119). Through this process, an understanding of the social process of coaching is communicated informally (Cushion et al., 2003), in turn reaffirming the 'common sense' assumption that coaches should lead from the front while athletes should subordinate themselves (Cassidy et al., 2009). This ingrained social process wherein coaches' positions of power are reaffirmed could further complicate the implementation of a seemingly straight-forward, transactional approach like athlete-centredness.

While the sports psychology literature positions athlete-centred behaviour as a form of best practice (Gould et al., 2013; Kidman, 2010), coaching sociologists have offered cogent critiques of the sporting and coaching context which challenge the intention of athlete-centred approaches to promote autonomy and decision making. For instance, while athlete-centred approaches intend to depart from directive-centred instruction into a learning partnership with the athlete, social, cultural and political pressures push coaches to maintain traditional practices rather than implement innovative strategies (Cushion, 2013). In order to more completely understand the practical implementation of athlete-centredness in contemporary high-performance coaching, the

tension between the psychological literature promoting this practice and the sociological literature problematizing coaching more broadly must be more thoroughly examined. In an effort to address this tension, I will introduce and review next the coaching sociology literature that has utilized the work of social theorist Michel Foucault in order to set the stage for my own critical analysis of athlete-centred approaches.

**Michel Foucault and Sports' Disciplinary Legacy**

While athlete-centred approaches are framed as a change from traditional "coach-centred" approaches, scholars such as Denison, Mills, and Konoval (2017) suggested that the potential for significant change is limited due to the context of the contemporary sporting environment. While athlete-centred coaching proposes to empower athletes and increase autonomy, many scholars have suggested that coaching has historically developed as a restrictive and disciplinary device (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Denison et al., 2017; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Shogan, 2007).

Much of the foundation for critiquing the historical development of coaching in these studies is based on the work of social theorist Michel Foucault. Foucauldian studies utilize an understanding of complex power relations as forces which can discipline and shape behaviour. Foucault (1995) recognized that disciplinary power is both productive and problematic. In his work, Foucault identified how specifically power penetrated the body and influenced behaviour through time, space, movement, and regulation. His work initially focused on social industrialization, and specifically how disciplinary power contributed to productivity in regulated areas of society such as the military, prisons, factories, or schools. However, sports sociologists have expanded on this work and made connections to a wide range of specific sporting contexts.

Foucault's identification of several disciplinary techniques informs the development of traditional coaching practices. The emphasis on order and efficiency evident in traditionally coach-centred approaches are reminiscent of other areas of social life such as the military or education systems, prisons, and hospitals. Space is tightly controlled through what Foucault termed the "art of distributions", wherein pupils can now be supervised, judged and classified according to their abilities…to eliminate confusion and neutralize the inconveniences (Foucault, 1995, p. 142). Time is closely regulated through the "control of activity", wherein an act is broken down into segments to ensure precision. Time penetrates the body so that "the rhythm imposed by signals, whistles, orders imposed on everyone temporal norms that were intended both to accelerate the process of learning and to teach speed as a virtue" (Foucault, 1995, p. 154). Activities are specifically and intentionally segmented based on difficulty towards a "terminal state" in what Foucault called the "Organization of Geneses" in order to aid in control and ranking of individuals. Ultimately, the "Composition of Forces" helps to ensure that the imposition of these smaller disciplinary forces upon the individual produces an individual that is one part of a multi-segmented machine, ensuring efficiency and predictability.

These disciplinary techniques are evident throughout sport coaching. Space, time, and movement are carefully scripted in order to maximize efficiency. For instance, in a team workout for basketball, athletes would be spatially arranged in lines where a coach could easily observe each individual. Exercises would be timed and segmented in order to gradually increase in difficulty. This process would be predictable, repeatable, and efficient. While the benefits of efficiency and predictability in social segments such as

the military or prison are evident, researchers have questioned whether these same techniques are applicable to the unique context of sport. For instance, Denison, Mills, and Konoval (2017) posed a series of questions regarding the implementation of discipline in the sporting context:

> Do coaches need to manage the same problems faced by military leaders and factory owners? Is dissent a problem coaches are trying to prevent? Or looting? Or desertion? Do coaches, many of whom work as volunteers in club, community or educational settings, need to be concerned with maximizing profit or making life and death decisions? (p. 5)

Through the routinization of discipline in sport, athletes can internalize and adapt behaviour according to the expectations of the coach. However, this process also carries unintended consequences which can severely hamper athletes' experiences. Foucault (1995) identified "docility" as an important consequence of highly disciplined social settings. While discipline may help to optimize predictability and efficiency, it also detracts from individuality. As an athlete conforms to disciplinary power, he or she can become a "cog in the machine" rather than a free-thinking, empowered individual—an obvious tension when considering the liberating intention of athlete-centred coaching. Through the historical development of disciplinary power in the 19$^{th}$ century, Foucault identified "a mechanics of power" which "defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines" (p. 138). As powerful actors in the social world of sport, coaches can dictate through these

disciplinary techniques how an athlete experiences sport and embodies the particular knowledge privileged by the coach and the sporting context.

Foucault's (1995) work on disciplinary power and its significant influence on sport sociology research (Rail & Harvey, 1995) paints a considerably different picture from the psychological literature promoting athlete-centredness as a viable means of optimizing athlete autonomy and empowerment—the tension which I address in this thesis. In the next section, I will further review the specific critiques of contemporary sport coaching made by researchers utilizing Foucauldian conceptualizations of disciplinary power. Ultimately, these studies serve to identify a research gap when considered with the differing perspectives proposing the significant benefits of athlete-centred practice. By examining how, if at all, the implementation of athlete-centred coaching differs from the historically disciplinary legacy of high-performance sport, we can begin to assess whether athlete-centred coaching is, as some scholars have suggested, a new gold standard for coaching practice.

**Disciplinary Power Enacted**

Various studies have applied Foucault's (1995) techniques of disciplinary power to different sporting contexts, from distance running (Denison, 2007) to gymnastics (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010,) to basketball (Shogan, 1999), swimming (McMahon, Penny, & Dinan-Thompson, 2012) and strength and conditioning (Gearity & Mills, 2012). Through these particular techniques, space, time, and movement are intensely regulated and monitored in order to maximize efficiency and impose normalized and predictable patterns of behaviour upon individuals, creating assimilation into the greater group. Instruments such as hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, panopticism,

and examination enforce discipline through social structure by further constraining, draining, and limiting athlete engagement. While these disciplines foster efficiency and predictability, they also can contribute to unintended consequences such as athlete roboticism and docility. By reviewing these studies, I begin to outline the tools with which to problematize the narrative presented by psychological researchers promoting athlete-centred and empowerment initiatives as viable alternatives to traditional forms of coaching given their lack of attention to broader social issues.

Modern coaching's historical development has stemmed from a focus on "the efficient organization and development of productive sporting bodies" (Denison, Mills, & Jones, 2013, p. 389). As a result, coaching programs have developed to become rigid and formulaic in their design in striving to optimize performance. Despite this well-intentioned goal, current sociological literature suggests that coaching is a considerably more complicated social process which demands more than solely "knowledge from the sports sciences alone or to assume a functional or mechanistic understanding of the body and human performance" (Denison et al., 2013, p. 390). While there is an increasing understanding of coaching as a complicated social process, critical analyses of effective coaching as disciplinary have been few in part because discipline is commonly considered an integral part of coaching (Shogan, 1999). Several studies, however, have directly applied Foucauldian analysis to high-performance sporting environments.

Barker-Ruchti and Tinning (2010) investigated the experiences of elite female gymnasts in Australia. In analyzing this context, several organizational and structural restrictors emerged which contributed to negative athlete experiences including dependence and docility. Foucauldian disciplinary techniques such as temporal

regulation, progression, and succession, and unequal power relations contributed to forming disciplined and obedient athletes. Importantly, the coaches in this study professed to care about their athletes and want the best for their development in the long term—positions that could be considered athlete-centred. However, the structure of the training environment privileged coaching knowledges and created an authoritative relationship between coach and athlete, wherein the coaches were the "unquestioned leaders in the gymnasium" (p. 243).

Lang (2010) identified a similar trend towards athlete docility and conformity in the context of competitive youth swimming in England. The Foucauldian disciplinary mechanism of surveillance contributed to athlete conformity to intensive training. For these athletes, compliance carried unintended consequences including a risk of both short-term and long-term injury in addition to potential psychological harm. Furthermore, the coach-athlete relationship suffered, detracting from a potentially beneficial and rewarding aspect of sport participation. Foster (2003) also explored athletic experience utilizing surveillance as a key concept in the context of black female athletes' experiences in an elite collegiate athletic program. While strict discipline and surveillance practices aimed to maximize athletic and academic potential through rigorous control, athlete autonomy suffered significantly.

Different forms of surveillance in other areas of sport have been investigated with similar conclusions. Manley, Palmer, and Roderick (2012) investigated the effects of panoptical surveillance in elite sporting academies at the highest levels of English soccer and rugby. Through networks of surveillance and discipline including training staffs, coaches, and peers, athlete behaviour was closely regulated and controlled. Interestingly,

these intrusive forms of surveillance were accepted as necessary measures and "perceived as a progressive tool to enhance performance and the chances of a positive competitive outcome for the athlete" (p. 316). Williams and Manley (2016) characterized coaching in a Rugby Union club as a technocratic activity wherein data accumulated through surveillance was utilized in quantifying athletic performance. As a result of the use of data as an objective "truth", or knowledge, wielded by the coach, these authors suggested that athletes passively and robotically conformed to expectation despite privately voiced frustrations about the process.

By normalizing athlete behavior through strict discipline, these elite sporting academies sacrifice athlete autonomy in attempting to enhance athletic performance and progression. These findings are a stark contrast to the proposed benefits of athlete-centredness highlighted in the psychological literature. Similarly, Taylor, Potrac, Nelson, Jones, and Groom (2017) investigated the disciplining effects of surveillance through video-based coaching in elite level field hockey. Through the "objective" process of analyzing video, the athlete is subjected to the normalizing gaze of the coaching staff, but also mediates their own behavior due to the constant disciplinary scrutiny of video surveillance. As athletes internalize the normalized behavior set forth by the disciplinary structure of contemporary sport, autonomy and empowerment are deemphasized, often without the coach realizing it, while compliance and docility are augmented.

**Toward a Foucauldian Analysis of Athlete-Centred Coaching**

Athlete-centred/empowerment coaching initiatives attempt to combat the unintended consequences of traditional coaching and create thinking, engaged athletes capable of performing at higher levels than a controlled, robotic athlete. However, these

approaches emerge from the same scientific, linear logic of traditional coaching and may not effectively address the powerful social structures contributing to disciplinary coaching.

For instance, the use of video analysis as a tool to encourage engagement and thinking from the athlete can replicate the surveillance technologies used in Foucault's (1995) discussion of disciplinary techniques. This reinforcement exists within a power hierarchy wherein the coach is the distributor of knowledge, with access to seemingly valuable and validated resources. Based on the transactional logic of sport psychology, involving the athlete in independent film study could encourage involvement and engagement. However, this logic fails to account for social forces. Rather than empowering the athlete, the use of video analysis could serve as another tool for the exertion of the coach's disciplinary authority over the less powerful athlete. Therefore, despite the intent to foster athlete autonomy in an athlete-centred way, a coach "is unlikely to develop the type of engaged or open-minded athletes he or she is intending to if at the same time he or she is not problematizing the docile-making effects of disciplinary power that have come to frame almost everything a coach does" (Denison et al., 2017, p. 8)." Because of the underlying assumptions inherent in the transactional approaches to an "athlete-centred" tactic which ignore important social context, the benefits may be limited.

The scientific logic underpinning the development of sport has contributed to the valuation of data driven approaches within the contemporary athletic context. This belief has become so pervasive that, as Denison et al. (2017) demonstrated through the discussion of video analysis, even alternative techniques continue to employ the

traditional rationale. The introduction of even more technologies for the regulation of athletes' behaviors can exacerbate the negative effects of a highly disciplinary environment, in part because the current approach to empowering athletes "is actually more about making athletes obedient and responsible not critical, questioning, independent and creative—qualities that supposedly run counter to excellence in sport." (Denison et al., 2017, p. 8).

Because of the dominant positioning of linear traditional logic in the sport realm, it can be difficult for a coach to depart from these practices as they involve the relinquishing of power and trusting the athlete. Unequal power relations favouring the coach can limit the risk of instituting "athlete-centred" approaches as these approaches are "easy to promote and implement, rooted as they are in increased personal responsibility and accountability on the part of the less powerful, for example, the athlete. As a result, coaching's dominant discursive formation largely goes untouched" (Denison et al., p. 10). This contemporary formation makes it easy for coaches to blame the failure of the athlete on the individual because the implementation of "athlete-centred" initiatives should, it is believed, result in increased levels of performance. Rather than investigating other potential causes limiting performance, such as the docile-inducing effects of discipline, a coach can easily attribute performance to the limitations of the individual athlete.

Despite these reservations about the efficacy of athlete-centredness in the contemporary context, I do not want to rule out the potential benefits of an athlete-centred approach. In fact, the intention of athlete-centred approaches to promote athlete involvement and autonomy attempt to address the problems associated with disciplinary

power in coaching. However, in order to truly value thinking athletes, a destabilization of the historically constructed contemporary understanding of athletic performance as linear, predictable, and machine-like is necessary. A Foucauldian approach to coaching can provide a coach with the tools to consider the contextual, ambiguous, and fluid factors which undoubtedly affect athletic performance. Perhaps then, an athlete-centred approach accompanied with an ability to problematize taken-for-granted coaching practices could address issues like docility and roboticism in high-performance environments? By taking this sociologically informed approach to the problem of athlete empowerment in the disciplinary realm of high-performance sport, I will attempt to better understand the complexities of implementing such an approach and ultimately inform practices which are more reflective and considerate of powerful social forces.

**My Study**

In order to further understand and explore both the potential benefits and challenges in implementing athlete-centred approaches, my study addresses the tension between the empowerment initiatives of athlete-centred coaching and the restricting social contexts of high-performance coaching by investigating athlete-centred coaching at the varsity level of university sport through interviews with university coaches. Because of the coaches' in-depth experiences in navigating the nuances and complexities of the social context of sport, these individuals provide a unique and important perspective in attempting to better understand athlete-centred initiatives in this setting.

While significant research exists supporting athlete-centredness in youth sport, by specifically investigating the highly competitive arena of university sport this study will address the fact that relatively little research exists at higher levels such as university or

professional athletics. This gap is particularly apparent given the considerable body of coaching sociology research suggesting that high-performance sport is highly disciplinary and may contribute to athlete docility and a lack of athlete engagement (Denison, 2007; Manley et al., 2012; Taylor, 2015), consequences which directly oppose the suggested benefits of athlete-centred approaches. Although the theoretical benefits of athlete-centredness on both athlete experience and traditional performance measures are encouraging, the complex contextual reality of high-performance sport presents significant challenges to the effective implementation of such strategies. In the words of Denison et al. (2017), "how can athlete empowerment initiatives be anything more than rhetoric within a disciplinary framework that normalizes maximum coach control? " (p. 1).

In order to understand the degree to which athlete-centredness is implemented in university sport, it is important to address the specifics of how such an approach is employed. While coaches are likely to voice their support for the general concepts of increasing athlete autonomy, decision making, and engagement, this study addresses to what degree, if at all, these ideas are implemented in daily practice. How is athlete-centred coaching utilized in the preseason as opposed to the day before a playoff game? How is athlete-centred coaching used with a senior player as opposed to a rookie?

Various studies have utilized Foucault through observational research to investigate the disciplinary environment of high-performance sport coaching. However, coaching intentionality and understanding as it relates to the implementation of athlete-centred coaching are of particular interest to me. In order to gain a better understanding of how coaches comprehend and implement athlete-centredness in daily practice, and

specifically in the unique context of a university sport setting, it is necessary to gain access to a coach's particular narrative through interview.

In the next chapter, I outline the methodological framework I used in this study to investigate through interviews when and how athlete-centred coaching is implemented in university sport` in order to address the following research questions: In what specific ways through actionable practice do coaches understand and implement athlete-centred approaches? How, if at all, do these specific practices depart from the problematic disciplinary framework of high-performance sport? What difficulties or pressures do coaches face in attempting to implement athlete-centred approaches in the varying contexts of the university sport season?

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## Introduction

While coaches are likely to support the ideas of athlete autonomy, engagement, and empowerment espoused by various athlete-centred initiatives, sociocultural research suggests that the disciplinary context of high-performance sport can complicate the implementation of such practices. By interviewing these coaches, I shed light on the extent to which there are specific and daily implementations of athlete-centred coaching in the university sport setting.

In this chapter, I detail the research methodology I used to investigate how, if at all, athlete-centred coaching is understood and implemented in the daily practices of university team sports. Of primary concern in introducing this methodology is positioning this research within the poststructuralist paradigm—an important departure from the post-positivist assumptions of athlete-centred coaching research in the sport psychology literature. After introducing the underlying assumptions of a poststructuralist paradigmatic approach, I describe the specific processes of recruitment and data collection in my interviews of university coaches. In the third section of this chapter, I describe the steps taken to ensure that I conduct my project ethically. Finally, I outline the process of analyzing my empirical material.

## Research Paradigm

This research is located in the poststructuralist paradigm, meaning that it carries specific underlying assumptions. Poststructuralism allows an investigation of the way in which university coaches come to understand and implement athlete-centredness. In

particular, this approach considers the specific contexts contributing to the development of athlete-centred knowledge. Poststructuralists acknowledge the potential for multiple truths, assuming that there are multiple fractured and dynamic realities (Markula & Silk, 2016). As a result, rather than accepting research supporting athlete-centredness as objectively true, this project accounts for the considerable social factors contributing to the development of this form of knowledge.

Beyond the development of athlete-centred knowledge, I am particularly interested in the translation of this form of knowledge to daily practice. The poststructuralist perspective I utilized in this research does not view coaching as a simple transaction in which information is transferred from coach to player, but as a complex social process. The implementation of this knowledge can also be complicated by a change in context, which might include a difference in training from one day to the next, a different athlete, or a different time of the season.

A poststructuralist approach to coaching research means that social interactions between coach and player are influenced by power relations. Rather than a structured hierarchy, power is available and engaged with by every individual through discourses, or ways of knowing, wherein some forms of knowledge can become privileged and more capable of exerting influence (Markula & Silk, 2016). Poststructuralism allows for an investigation of how coaches come to understand, interact with, and implement these knowledges. As a consequence of this approach to knowledge, poststructuralist research can act as a subversive catalyst for change because "society is considered a site of constant political struggle with continual competition for dominance depending on who dominates the meaning field at the time" (Markula & Silk, 2016, p. 49). Avner, Jones,

and Denison (2014) suggested that poststructuralist research can map discourses that influence what is accepted as knowledge, critique the unintended consequences of these forces, and ultimately alter practice to better account for critiques. Achieving all three of these goals is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, by using a poststructuralist approach in evaluating how coaches understand and implement athlete-centred coaching in university sport, this project has the potential to identify unintended consequences and encourage critical reflection of coaching practice.

**Method**

As Markula and Silk (2016) identified interviewing is "a conversation with a purpose" which should be utilized to answer questions which are not available through other methods such as participant observation. This point is particularly relevant to the choice of interviews for this project. While it would be possible to critically examine day to day coaching practice through observation, I am particularly interested in coaching intentionality and understanding as it relates to the implementation of athlete-centred coaching. In order to gain a better understanding of how coaches comprehend and implement athlete-centred knowledge in daily practice, specifically in the unique context of a university sport setting, it is necessary to gain access to a coach's particular narrative through interview. This insight would not be possible in the context of observational research alone.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that while I did consider using a discourse analysis to gain a better understanding of how athlete-centred coaching exists in the broader coaching context, there is already considerable evidence supporting that athlete-empowerment is a form of common knowledge in coaching circles. For instance,

Denison et al. (2017), highlighted that athlete-centred coaching has been promoted and discussed in coach development courses, clinics, conferences and workshops, while Canada passed sport policies supporting athlete-centred initiatives as early as 1994 (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994). Rather than reiterating research demonstrating that athlete-centred coaching is an established discourse in the coaching community, I have investigated the ways in which this discourse is translated into practice through the use of interviews.

**Sample**

High-performance sport demands significant involvement and prioritizes winning. In representing this pressurized environment, I interviewed the head coaches of eight USports teams, the highest level of university athletics in Canada. As this research is informed and driven by my own experience as a university basketball player, my primary area of interest is team sports. Team sports' contexts differ significantly from those of individual sports, as coaches must account for players' abilities to coexist and work together towards a common goal. While sports such as track and field or swimming do include elements of teamwork, I focused primarily on sports where competition involves several athletes working together simultaneously. At the USports level, these sports include basketball, volleyball, soccer, hockey, football, and rugby. Team sports where athletes must fill a variety of roles within a larger collective provide further complications for coaches, as they alter coaching practice depending on the context of individual athletes— nother intriguing factor related to athlete-centred approaches. I addressed the unique context of team sport coaching, among other specific areas, in my interview guide.

Participants were recruited based on purposeful, criterion-based sampling, as "information- rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Patton, 2003, p. 30). Coaches were both male and female, and were all the head coach of a men's or women's team sport at the USports level. I did not anticipate that gender, whether of athletes or coaches, would significantly impact the focus of my study. While sample size is a less clearly defined issue in qualitative research than in quantitative studies, Markula and Silk (2016) suggested that a sample of 10 or fewer semi-structured interviews was appropriate for a masters thesis. I interviewed eight coaches, as well as conducting two pilot interviews with assistant coaches in order to adjust my interview guide.

**Procedure**

I conducted semi-structured interviews, meaning that questions were open ended, leading to in-depth information about coaches' understanding and use of athlete-centred coaching. Semi-structured interviews are consistent with the poststructuralist paradigmatic approach described above (Markula & Silk, 2016). Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between one and two hours. Because the subject matter of the interview was related to the daily work of the participants and did not touch on sensitive subject matter, I conducted the interviews in a semi-private location of the participants choosing. These locations included areas such as a coach's office or a coffee shop where an uninterrupted and purposeful conversation was possible.

In formulating an interview guide, Markula and Silk (2016) suggested organizing a series of themes or topics with a set of questions underneath each theme. By utilizing a semi-structured interview guide, there was both the opportunity for in-depth investigation

of specific topics as well as the opportunity to deviate from the guide in pursuing other related topics. My interview guide was naturally divided according to the three separate research questions highlighted in my literature review chapter. These three themes covered a range of issues within the implementation of athlete-centred coaching, with more specific questions under each theme.

The first section of my interview guide was informed by my first research question, "in what specific ways through actionable practice do coaches understand and implement athlete-centred approaches?". This theme related specifically to the intentional daily actions coaches utilized in promoting athlete engagement and empowerment. In this section of the interview guide, I hoped to gain more insight as to what coaches considered athlete-centred practice, how they came to know about this and how specifically this approach is or is not put into practice on a daily basis.

The next theme was informed by my second research question, "how, if at all, do these specific practices depart from the problematic disciplinary framework of high-performance sport?". This related to the significant body of research critiquing high-performance sport as disciplinary. As coaching scholars like Denison et al., (2013) and Barker-Ruchti and Tinning (2010) have demonstrated, discipline in high-performance sport is capable of contributing to negative consequences such as athlete docility. This theme investigated coaches' varying understandings of the negative effects of discipline, and aimed to prompt reflection on both traditional disciplinary practice as well as athlete-centred behaviour in daily coaching practice.

The final theme of my interview guide stemmed from my third research question, "What difficulties or pressures do coaches face in attempting to implement athlete-

centred approaches in the varying contexts of the university sport season?". This theme investigated the often complex and dynamic world of university sport, as poststructuralist research places a great deal of value on context in shaping behaviour. As different contextual variables including athlete age or leadership position on the team, time of the season (i.e. playoffs or preseason), and proximity to competition (i.e. a week away or game day) shift constantly throughout the year, coaching behaviours also change. By delving into a coaches' process in navigating these varying contextual factors, I aimed to identify the ways in which coaches do or do not understand and implement athlete-centred coaching.

**Ethics**

As with all research involving human subjects, it was necessary to ensure that research ethics were accounted for and that all participants were treated with dignity and respect. Markula and Silk (2016) identified four ethical principles related specifically to qualitative research. I undertook several specific and detailed steps in making sure that each of these four broader principles was accounted for in the research process.

The first principle identified by Markula and Silk (2016) in order to ensure that participants are treated with respect and dignity is free and informed consent. In order to provide evidence of free and informed consent, I provided all potential participants with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study and what their involvement entailed. Furthermore, I obtained consent through a signed form detailing the specifics of the study. This form stated that participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and each coach was informed that withdrawal can occur at any time. As I interviewed the participants, the consent form highlighted the need for a recorded conversation, which

was secured on a password protected hard drive available only to the interviewer. Furthermore, as Markula and Silk (2016) identified, it was important to ensure that the language used in participant forms was not academic or theoretical to the point that it could not be understood.

Markula and Silk (2016) described vulnerable persons as individuals "who do not have the means, education or ability fully to comprehend the research purpose" (p. 18). Because the sample in this research was comprised entirely of adult coaches employed at the University level, participant vulnerability was not an issue. However, by being proactive and thorough in providing information to potential participants I minimized the risk of a vulnerable participant.

The third principle of qualitative research ethics identified by Markula and Silk (2016) is privacy and confidentiality. While confidentiality is impossible to maintain in an interview setting, I ensured participant anonymity by utilizing pseudonyms for each individual. Because university coaches are relatively high profile individuals and therefore may be easily identifiable, I did not divulge any specific details regarding the research setting, including the name of the university, or the specific sport of each coach.

Finally, in considering the ethical principles of justice and inclusiveness, I considered both the short term and long term benefits of participation in the study, as well as the potential harm. In the short term, asking coaches to detail the specifics of their athlete-centred behavior could lead to further reflection which might inform positive change in coaching practice independent from any of my own findings. In the long term, I hope that this study might provide a more complete, sociologically informed critique of how athlete-centred coaching is utilized in university team sports. By utilizing social

science research to critically examine a relatively new approach to sport coaching, this study could provide benefits to sport coaches who begin to consider the social impacts of both traditional coaching practice, and newer athlete empowerment initiatives. This study presented minimal risk and minimal harm to participants as the interview focused on the daily practices of sport coaches, a subject that did not touch on sensitive issues or cause any distress. By consciously addressing each of the principles laid out by Markula and Silk (2016), I ensured that I performed ethically sound qualitative research which has the potential to positively impact university sport coaches and athletes.

**Analysis**

Poststructuralist analysis of empirical material, "does not necessitate detailed verification of the research process to ensure objectivity" (Markula & Silk, 2016 p. 108). In remaining consistent with my paradigmatic orientation, I used theory based analysis in approaching the empirical material resulting from these interviews. As a result, I placed emphasis on coaches' individual and subjective meaning making within the social and political context of university sport.

Markula and Silk (2016) emphasized the importance of clarity in disclosing and maintaining ontological and epistemological assumptions throughout the research process. By explicitly acknowledging my poststructuralist paradigmatic approach throughout each step of outlining my research methodology, I utilized the theoretical underpinnings of previous sociocultural research in informing my analysis. Markula and Silk (2016) identified a general pattern for interview analysis in poststructuralist research which I used in this process. This pattern includes the identification of themes, the analysis of themes, and connections with power relations, theory, and previous literature.

First, I identified themes present in my interview material, a process aided by the creation of a themed interview guide before the interview process. These three themes were initially based off of my three main research questions: (1) Understanding and daily implementation of athlete-centred coaching, (2) athlete-centred practices and discipline, and (3) contextual factors in athlete-centred coaching. Having completed initial identification of themes and an initial review of my interview data, I identified intersections and discrepancies between themes, and identified new themes which were not present in the initial identification process. Throughout this process, I was particularly aware of power relations within the different actors of university coaching, including various athletes, coaches, and administrators. Finally, I connected my themed empirical material to Foucault's (1995) work on disciplinary power, including the disciplinary techniques and instruments, as well as other previous literature applying Foucault's work to the sporting context. I alluded to these disciplinary techniques in putting together the themes of my interview guide, an important step in acknowledging my subjectivity as a poststructuralist researcher. The final step of analysis, as outlined by Markula and Silk (2016), created more specific connections between my empirical material and Foucault's work in creating a theoretically informed analysis of athlete-centred coaching.

**Summary**

By utilizing a poststructuralist paradigmatic approach to investigate athlete-centred coaching in university team sports, I have provided a new perspective regarding a well-intentioned approach to enriching athlete experience and performance. By gaining insight into the level of understanding and implementation of athlete-centred coaching

through in-depth interviews with university sport coaches, I was able to appraise the level to which coach empowerment initiatives are actually utilized in high-performance sport. Furthermore, by utilizing theoretically based analysis informed by Foucault's (1995) work on discipline, I have identified potentially counterproductive practices which could potentially produce athlete docility and disengagement, rather than promoting free-thinking athletes. In applying a critical, Foucauldian informed lens to athlete-centred coaching, I hope to inform and positively influence coaching practice so that athletes can avoid feeling detached and docile, as I did in my time as a university athlete. In the next chapter, I present the results and analysis of my interviews.

# Chapter 4: Results

## Introduction

In the process of my analysis, I identified three themes that most evidently address my inquiry into how university coaches do or do not understand and utilize athlete-centred coaching. While I emphasized the importance of implementation in practice, the first of my three themes addresses how coaches have come to learn about athlete-centred coaching, and how they define what athlete-centred coaching means as a method to improve athlete performance and experience. I was particularly fascinated by the dominant rhetoric of traditional coaching knowledges, such as sports psychology. My second theme considered the ways in which coaches used athlete-centredness outside the playing arena through various forms including leadership groups and processes of forming team values. The third theme addressed how coaches utilized athlete-centred coaching in their sport training sessions. While my first theme analyzes the formation of knowledges, the latter two focus on Foucauldian disciplinary techniques and their effects on the body through practice.

## How do coaches learn and understand Athlete-Centred Coaching?

Before delving into the daily specifics of coaching practices, I endeavoured to learn more about how the coaches were initially exposed to athlete-centred coaching, as well as how they understood the concept. While these coaches had varied and unique backgrounds leading to their coaching philosophies, how these coaches articulated their understanding of athlete-centred coaching was remarkably similar. Three areas of this theme were particularly apparent in the discourse surrounding athlete-centred coaching

used by these coaches: Defining athlete-centred coaching and its benefits, how formal learning opportunities addressed athlete-centred coaching, and the importance of informal learning through playing the sport and mentor coaches.

Because of the broad definition of athlete-centred coaching in the academic literature (Lombardo, 1999; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002), it was unsurprising to me that coaches alluded to multiple aspects of athlete-centredness. Every coach highlighted the importance of placing the athletes at the forefront of their decision making process, but also referred to several other points of emphasis.

Jason, Dave, Erik, and Sean identified the importance of developing well-rounded people, an holistic facet of athlete-centredness which accompanies sport performance. Jason identified the importance of viewing sport as a vehicle for learning. "For me, athlete-centred coaching is designed for an athlete to develop in multiple ways which will serve them for the rest of their life. Our whole program is set up for that". Jason suggested that sport performance was a by-product of values and behaviours which transcend the sporting arena. Similarly, Sean defined athlete-centred coaching with reference to the holistic development of the athletes.

> How am I making sure my athletes are getting- socially, emotionally athletically-, what they need out of their sport context. If I'm doing my job they'll be happy, well-adjusted people enjoying their sport and performing the best they can. (Sean)

Defining athlete-centredness as an emphasis on the holistic development of athletes closely mirrors the intentions of the model to optimize potential physical, cognitive, psychological, and social benefits of sport participation (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010., Miller & Kerr, 2002).

While coaches like Jason presented success as a by-product of the values emphasized through holistic coaching, other coaches were more explicit in highlighting the links between athlete-centred coaching and performance. Mary stated that athlete-centred coaching was key to producing motivated athletes.

> At that time, especially in our sport, the primary method of motivation was fear and intimidation. There was a sort of new way coming through educational psychology and into sport where there may be a different way of doing it so that people can be self-motivated. So at that time the attention started coming to the individual, and the buzzword of being athlete-centred came in. (Mary)

The shifting emphasis that Mary described does not only relate to the intention to motivate, but also alludes to the potentially problematic effects of traditional coaching through "fear and intimidation". Interestingly, Mary framed athlete-centredness as a "buzzword" and a means of promoting self-motivation, rather than a holistic philosophy which counters the problematic effects of old-school coaching. Similarly, Blake highlighted the importance of motivation in defining athlete-centred coaching. By giving the athlete more control and input into what they are doing, athletes "buy into decisions, and you're more invested than being told what to do".

Although defining an athlete-centred approach as an important part of athlete motivation and empowerment, both Blake and Mary were quick to point out that their programs needed to be "athlete-centred but coach driven" to avoid the "athletes running the asylum" (Mary). This caveat is an interesting perspective that is unique from the more holistic conceptualization of athlete-centredness outlined by Jason and Sean, and furthermore ties in to Foucault's (2006) work on madness and the birth of asylums.

Foucault outlined how asylums developed from positivism as a way of exerting control and organization in order to manipulate the physical manifestations of 'madness'. Through mechanisms like observation in order to foster "self restraint", Foucault proposed that rather than a form of freedom, the asylum was a "positive operation that enclosed madness in a system of rewards and punishments" (p. 487). Mary's language indicated that, rather than true freedom and empowerment, her continued exertion of control may more closely resemble the use of athlete-centredness as a systemic tool to produce a result.

Rather than a philosophy intended to produce universal growth, Mary and Blake framed the purpose of athlete-centred coaching as a tool to facilitate athlete motivation. By providing the athletes with more decision making power, Mary and Blake believed they would produce more motivated athletes. Avner, Denison, and Markula (2019) described how university coaches used the construct of fun in a similar way, as an instrument through which to improve performance and motivation. While other scholars have promoted the increase of "fun" or enjoyment in "challenging the win at all cost mentality" of the professional model of sport (Bigelow, Moroney, & Hall, 2001; Mastrich, 2002), Avner et al. (2019) problematized the way in which coaches strategically and selectively used fun. Rather than undermining traditional practices that tend not to be fun, "these uses of fun operated to support dominant disciplinary training practices that previous Foucauldian-informed coaching scholars have shown to be problematic" (p. 57-58). For instance, an athlete not having fun was characterized by coaches as "not having the 'right' mental make up to play at the highest level of the game" (Avner et al., p. 44). In this way, 'fun' was employed by coaches to naturalize

traditional training practices as difficult or monotonous. The use of athlete-centred coaching as a tool, rather than a philosophy, carries the same risk. That is, although athlete-centred coaching may be used selectively to empower, power relations which lead coaches to revert to more dominant disciplinary tactics can adversely affect athletes.

The origins of Mary and Blake's definition of athlete-centred coaching as a means to increase motivation led to a second shared subtheme in how the coaches in my study said they learned about athlete-centred coaching. Several coaches mentioned sports psychology, whether through an academic background or through consultation with a practicing psychologist, as a key avenue of learning about athlete-centred coaching. Additionally, learning from other coaches through sport conferences and consultation was prevalent. In both of these cases, learning is intentional and structured, representing traditional and formalized coach education opportunities. This distinction is important in separating these instances from experiential and informal learning, which I will discuss shortly.

Mary discussed the emergence of athlete-centredness as an important aspect of her sports psychology background.

> A lot of the sort of philosophical methods were formed by reading and conversations with (Sports Psych mentor) about how to create a culture where the athletes are driving it, so you don't have to come up with tricks to motivate them. If you create a culture of achievement, they're going to run with it. (Mary)

While Mary said that an athlete-centred culture can prevent the need to use "tricks" to produce motivation, she framed athlete-centredness itself as a means of creating motivation in her athletes through her use of athlete-centred tactics. Utilizing athlete-

centredness selectively in order to create motivation in this transactional manner could be characterized itself as a "trick". Furthermore, Mary's desire to create a "culture of achievement" is notable, as the manner in which this culture is achieved is of paramount importance as it relates to its efficacy as an athlete-centred practice. While it is possible for a culture to be athlete-driven, Foucault (1995) suggested that the enforcement of this culture could also act as a self-regulatory disciplinary instrument. While such a practice may be productive, it runs counter to the goals of athlete-empowerment initiatives by restricting and controlling behaviour, rather than encouraging creativity, decision-making, and autonomy. If a coach's vision of team culture is enforced through mechanisms such as hierarchy, this practice may reproduce a problematic disciplinary environment contradicting its superficial appearance as an athlete-centred method. For instance, although athletes enforcing a structure may seem inherently athlete-centred, these actions are likely to be influenced by power relations which can contribute to the more dominant, disciplinary structure of sport coaching.

As detailed by Miller and Kerr (2002), athlete-centred coaching emerged from sports psychology which aimed to improve athletic performance through measurable outcomes, a purpose is demonstrated in Mary's language when citing the use of athlete-centred principles in order to create motivation in her athletes. However, utilizing athlete-centredness as a tool through which to produce an outcome, rather than a philosophy, contributes to the potential of a coach taking back control in an attempt to produce a performance outcome. While coaching in an athlete-centred way is not mutually exclusive from the pursuit of winning, the pressure to win contributes to difficulties in actually implementing these practices.

Sean also mentioned the impact of sports psychology on his continuing coach education, stating that he was interested in coaching philosophy and leadership work rather than tactical sport training in describing a conference he recently attended. "Yes, a couple of coaches talked at it, but it was more like team sports psychologists coming and talking about athletes and coaching practices." (Sean).

Clearly, the repeated appearance of sports psychology as a dominant voice informing how coaches perceive and implement their practice carries significance. Foucault might have described the importance of sports psychology in coaching as resulting from:

> … a multiplicity of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location, which overlap, repeat, or imitate one another, support one another, distinguish themselves from one another according to their domain of application, converge and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method. (Foucault, 1995, 138)

Sports psychology is a prevalent discourse that coaches cite as an important form of foundational and continuing knowledge. In this sense, sports psychology has informed the way that coaches understand, discuss, and utilize practices. This discourse seems to be viewed as legitimate by coaches as a result of the prevalence of its narrative in and surrounding coaching, whether in the form of coaching conferences or as an established traditional method of informing coaching practice. Through the repeated and pointed use of sports psychology as a means of improving coaching practices, whether by sports psychologists or other coaches, this narrative has become accepted practice in the coaching community. However, an uncritical acceptance of these practices could lead to negative unintended consequences. For example, the replication and widespread

acceptance of a practice informed by sports psychology which utilizes disciplinary power to influence behaviour may detract from potentially empowering, athlete-centred intentions. Once again, this is not to say that disciplinary power is necessarily bad, as Foucault (1995) suggested that discipline is productive and can contribute to order and efficiency. Nevertheless, the use of disciplinary tactics without a thorough understanding of their potential negative affects on the body, and their opposition to the goals of empowerment which are central to an athlete-centred philosophy make the implementation of these practices complicated.

Sean further articulated the importance of legitimized knowledge in describing his background and unorthodox ascent to the position of head coach. Because of the lack of formal coaching education in his background, Sean described his early coaching philosophy as "malleable" and lacking formal training which forced him to figure out what coaching practices fit best with his values and personality.

While this background outside of traditional sport could be beneficial, Sean had reservations which further demonstrated the privileged status of traditional coaching knowledges. Despite nearly 20 years coaching at the postsecondary level and multiple national championships, Sean was still hesitant to present his knowledge at conferences because of his lack of formal training.

> I know that part of my job should be giving NCCP (National Coaching Certification Program) clinics, but I've never given one, and I've never given one intentionally because I don't believe it should be me because I never really had that academic, big background in coaching, brought up through a system and being taught how to do all this. (Sean)

Sean viewed formal coach training through a "system" as a privileged knowledge which empowers coaches. Williams and Manley (2016) characterized coaches as wielding knowledge in the form of objective 'truth', wherein "power becomes bound to the production of knowledge and the acquisition of data sets to establish clear 'truths' related to the performance of the institution" (p. 839). Similarly, as coaches who have achieved performance success espouse the benefits of traditional coaching knowledges, these narratives are reinforced and perceived as legitimate and valued. Sean seemed to articulate a similar perspective as it relates to coaches with formal training, legitimizing their knowledge while discounting other perspectives, including his own. By accepting traditional sport knowledges as powerful and objective truth, potentially beneficial alternatives are ignored. By choosing not to view his own practices as legitimate and intentionally self-censoring, the non-traditional practices that Sean does utilize do not disturb the established discourse.

While the attitudes Sean and Mary articulated established sports psychology as a dominant discourse in the coaching community, and a means of learning more about athlete-centred coaching, some were critical of these opportunities. Erik, a relatively young coach in the early stages of his career, expressed that while some of the content of these learning opportunities addressed coaching philosophy, such as athlete-centred coaching, the focus was primarily on sport specific tactics.

> There have been instances where coaches have shown different methods of ensuring the coaches are internalizing what you're trying to teach them. I think maybe that's a next step and hopefully as I keep going up the NCCP, or go to Europe, or pursue licenses that will become more prominent. (Erik)

Erik expressed a desire that coaching philosophies like athlete-centredness are more explicitly addressed by formal coach education opportunities, a worthwhile note given his position as a head coach.

Harold discussed how although sports psychology and formal conferences were one approach to learning about coaching, he learned more from "being involved in teams, learning how to act and what you value". Similarly, every coach referred to informal experiences, such as their time playing or spent as an assistant coach learning from a coach mentor, as an important factor contributing to their understanding of athlete-centred coaching.

Harold completed a graduate level coaching program following a professional playing career, while also mentioning his completion of all three levels of NCCP training. However, he credited experiential learning as the key factor contributing to his coaching philosophy, and downplays the efficacy of formal training in affecting how he implements philosophies like athlete-centred coaching.

> You see how people handle scenarios, how they treat the team, how they deal with dynamics or captains and leadership, holding people responsible, punishment type stuff. It all goes into your bank. Depending on your personality that's either all you know or you let it influence and shape your philosophy."

Similarly, Jason stated that his motivation to employ athlete-centred practices was based on his experiences as a player. While he experienced success as a professional athlete, he viewed well rounded development, especially academically, as key to his long-term success. Jason said that these experiences, were the primary motivation for his use of athlete-centred coaching practices.

> I saw so many guys who went to university for four years and did absolutely nothing. By the time they got to us, you're a grown man and you're thinking about starting a family- you're not going to go back to go back to school and finish 2/3 of a degree. Shame on the guy's coach for letting the guy drift through and do nothing. (Jason)

While these coaches stated that athlete-centredness had been introduced in formal learning environments, they highlighted the importance of experiential learning as the most influential factor affecting their coaching, a potentially problematic trend as it relates to the implementation of these practices. Cushion, Armour, and Jones (2003) have suggested that coach learning is often observational and uncritical, stating that "experience plays a central role in impacting upon coaches' practice" (p. 225), a finding mirrored in my study. Power relations reinforcing this discourse as dominant contribute to the acceptance of tacit knowledge as 'truth'. Rather than the truth, however, this discourse resembles a specific truth game or norm wherein commonly accepted knowledge is left unquestioned. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that coaches relied on traditional, disciplinary coaching when the stakes were raised, and treated athlete-centred knowledges as tools to utilize strategically. In this structure, the fundamental approach to coaching is unchanged, and athlete-centred tactics are utilized selectively in augmenting a more traditional disciplinary form of coaching knowledge.

The prevalence of experiential learning as a discourse informing coaching practice in my sample is particularly interesting when considering that athlete-centred coaching is a relatively new development of which the previous generation of coaches may not have been informed. Given the recent development of athlete-centred coaching,

it is interesting to speculate how effectively such an approach could be implemented when the mentor coaches providing these highly valued experiential learning opportunities may not have been exposed to such a recent advancement. Importantly, while coaches may be aware of the potential benefits of athlete-centredness, the impact of experience on coaching practice may indicate that the attempted implementation of such an approach could be easily compromised. As a result, the goals of athlete-centred coaching to empower athletes and encourage creativity and decision making may not be achieved. If these goals are to be more successfully addressed, an approach must consider the considerable implications of the disciplinary legacy of high-performance sport.

Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac (2004) have problematized the pedagogical formation of coaching philosophy as potentially inflexible and impractical.

> Yet despite this official recognition that a philosophy has a direct impact on behaviour, many coaches consistently fail to engage adequately with the philosophic concept, not really grasping its relevance for, and accompanying influence over, practical problems. (p. 55)

While the coaches in my study expressed their knowledge of the potential value of athlete-centred coaching, the actual implementation of these philosophies is a separate matter, and the subject of my next two themes. Furthermore, the coaches in my study identified three dominant sources of knowledge pertaining to athlete-centredness (sports psychologists, other coaches, and experiential learning) which do not problematize the underlying logic informing privileged coaching knowledges. Rather these discourses

ascribe coaches a position of 'legitimized' knowledge that does not differ significantly from the logic informing old-school, disciplinary coaches.

Having established how the coaches I interviewed came to understand the concept of athlete-centred coaching, I asked them next to describe how they transferred this knowledge into practice. This topic led to my second theme, wherein coaches emphasized the importance of empowering their athletes away from the playing field.

**Empowerment Away from the Playing Field**

The coaches I interviewed identified several different strategies to increase athlete responsibility away from the playing field. Among these, the three most notable included allowing athletes a voice in forming and enforcing team norms and values, the use of captains and athlete leadership groups, and the process of relationship building between coach and athlete. While most of the coaches expressed a straightforward intention to improve both athlete experience and performance through these tactics, the structures and procedures utilized were more complicated. In several cases, the athlete-centred strategies these coaches used to 'empower' their athletes were characteristic of more traditional, disciplinary forms of coaching. A common thread throughout this theme was the importance of hierarchy and structure, tools which coaches utilized to ensure that they maintained significant influence on their individual athletes, and programs as a whole.

To varying degrees, coaches identified the importance of athletes setting the tone for the team in terms of values and norms. Sean detailed the most formal version of this process, where his team went through an annual exercise to define the values that the athletes found most important during a team retreat. In four areas (practice, academics, relationships, and social life), the group defined what behaviours were expected.

> Obviously in a game a head coach is going to make a decision and sometimes there are things I've got to do because I have more experience and time in this, and I already know how this is going to go. But, for the most part, they're hopefully empowered to know that they have a say in everything that happens here all the way through their career. (Sean)

Because of the athletes' involvement in defining expectations, Sean expressed that the enforcement of consequences when these expectations were not met became easier. "It's their team. So, police your team room, make sure things are running the way we want to live based on the values that we've all agreed upon" (Sean). In this case, athletes were empowered through their active participation in not only the formation, but also the enforcement of values which normalize team behaviour. Despite the intention to empower, Foucault (1995) wrote that "normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another" (p. 184). Foucault suggested that the process of normalization is in itself disciplinary, making it difficult for coaches attempting to strike a balance between the intention of empowerment and the formalization of norms and values.

When I asked Mary about how she empowers athletes in daily practice, she also described the process of value formation and the importance of these structures.

> We pretty much know how we do what we do, and a lot of it is not necessarily passed from the coach to the newer athletes, but from the older athletes. If there is a change in what we do, that's where you'd see me being athlete-centred… Any time you change routines or norms it can be really disruptive. (Mary)

Mary went on to say that although she has the final say, when making a change to the established norms of behavior, it is important for her to consult with her athletes as "probably 90% of the decisions I make I want their opinion on".

While Mary stated that consulting with her athletes prior to making a change was athlete-centred, several facets of this practice more closely resemble traditional disciplinary structures. The normative "what we do" described by Mary can homogenize and restrict behavior (Foucault, 1995) rather than empower athletes. Rather than true empowerment, these athletes are influenced to make decisions which fit within the normative expectation of the team culture. What the team does influences athlete choice, and rewards behavior that does not disturb the status quo.

That is not to say that this normative structure is not useful or necessary, as Foucault (1995) posited that discipline is productive. As demonstrated in his examinations of areas like the military, Foucault showed that discipline contributes to efficient, predictable behavior which is valued in these settings. Mary placed a tremendous amount of importance on the stability of this normative structure, pointing out that athletes can depend on predictable routines and that any change can be "stressful and traumatic". The importance of this predictability, and Mary's reservations about implementing changes that destabilize the status quo, are addressed by the effects of discipline that Foucault (1995) described, "discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions" (p. 219). So although Mary verbalized her athlete-centred intentionality, the translation of the normative structure implemented in her program may be

counteractively disciplinary, and carry unintended consequences that do not contribute to the ultimate goals of an athlete-centred approach.

Furthermore, rather than a process in which the athletes are actively involved in the definition of team norms and values, the structure of normative behavior Mary described is passed down hierarchically from the older athletes. The importance of leadership groups was consistently reiterated throughout the interviews as an athlete-centred practice which was particularly useful within the context of a team sport. For instance, the size of Jason's team made it difficult to effectively communicate with each athlete individually. As a result, Jason described a framework that allowed him to, at least superficially, empower his older athletes while the enforcement of values more broadly was maintained through hierarchical communication. He described an inner-circle of athlete leadership comprised of older, trusted players who most frequently communicate with him directly.

> If there's something going on disciplinarily, or there's something going on with the team, they'll come talk to me and I'll say 'what do you think, what should happen with this kid?'… A lot of stuff they deal with themselves, but they'll talk to me about how they want to deal with it. (Jason)

The next layer of this structure included athletes who Jason deemed had leadership qualities that made them capable of facilitating team discussions in small groups. The last layer of this highly structured leadership hierarchy consisted of the remainder of the team.

Once again, although Jason believed that this structure is athlete-centred insofar as it allows athletes responsibility within the team framework, such a practice is rooted in

more traditional, disciplinary logic. Foucault (1995) suggested that hierarchal observation creates an environment in which discipline is enacted systemically.

> By means of such surveillance, disciplinary power became an 'integrated' system, linked from the inside to the economy and to the aims of the mechanism in which it was practised. It was also organized as a multiple, automatic and anonymous power; for although surveillance rests on individuals, its functioning is that of a network of relations from top to bottom, but also to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally; this network 'holds' the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisors, perpetually supervised. (Foucault, 1995, p. 176-177).

The role of hierarchical observation in maintaining predictable, enforceable, normative behavior is integral for team sport coaches because of the difficulty in communicating with a large group. Dave expressed this when discussing the unique circumstances of coaching a large group.

> It's important for us to have that leadership group because they become my eyes and ears, and they also become our voice. If the structure, or the machine is working well, then the captains are bringing the team needs to you and they're sharing and echoing the coaches' ideas, but also challenging the coaches in some ways. (Dave)

Even while acknowledging the importance of athletes challenging coaches, Dave asserted the importance of hierarchy in ensuring efficiency while alluding to the machine-like logic of traditional approaches to sport coaching, language which closely mirrors Foucault's description of disciplinary power in the 19$^{th}$ century, wherein "the human

body was entering a machinery of power that explored it, broke it down and rearranged it" (Foucault, 1995, p. 138). Through this process, the coaching tactic of hierarchical leadership may, in reality, act as "a mechanics of power" (Foucault, 1995) through which behavior is regulated. This machine-like logic runs counter to an athlete-centred approach, where the goals include empowering athletes and encouraging creativity and decision making,

The reinforcement of normative behavior through hierarchy is disciplinary itself, however this practice is potentially exacerbated by the process in which athlete leaders are chosen. While the athletes are allotted some input, Jason made sure that the athletes in the highest levels of the structure were those whom he trusted, even when this choice did not align with the team's. "There's been times when I've said this isn't a popularity contest, that guy doesn't do all the right things" (Jason). Other coaches have used similar tactics in ensuring that athletes in leadership positions are closely aligned with the coach. Blake always picked the captains in his program because "players do popularity things and pick the wrong person. One of the most important things for me is that person being able to talk to me. If they pick someone who I have no time for or rapport with, that's not a good thing" (Blake).

In effect, by maintaining the ultimate decision making power in the appointment of leaders, coaches may be able to choose the voices which most closely align with their perspective. Most often, these athletes are the oldest, and have spent the most time in the system becoming accustomed to the structure and norms of the team. These athletes are most likely to have internalized the normalizing disciplinary structure of the team. While it is true that coaches have valuable experience which can help in making leadership

decisions, unilaterally overruling team votes does not reflect an athlete-centred philosophy. Despite their intentions, Foucault (1995) might suggest that a coach's 'empowerment' of athletes in hierarchical leadership structures may only reinforce disciplinary power.

Interestingly, Mary also discussed how empowering her captains depended on the context of the season. While throughout the year, these athletes were given responsibilities such as organizing team meals, Mary did not believe that this responsibility was appropriate when the pressure to win was highest. "I think taking the control from the athlete is liberating because they don't have that weight on them" (Mary). It is notable that despite intentionally empowering her athletes off of the court, fears of decreased performance under pressure motivated Mary to take back control. "I think it's humanistic to do it. How can we minimize regression by freeing them?" (Mary). Mary's language of "freeing" the athlete is actually the opposite within an athlete-centred context. Taking back control from previously empowered athletes suggests that, despite acknowledging the potential benefits of such a philosophy, Mary does not entirely buy in to the demonstrated benefits of such an approach. Kidman and Lombardo (2010), identified this tendency.

> The idea of success as athlete learning, enjoyment, performance or growth is often overridden by a 'winning at all costs' attitude which ignores athletes' needs and sabotages the pursuit of excellence with the result that sport participation degenerates into a means to an end. (p. 39)

Rather than relying on an athlete-centredness as a philosophy, this logic treats athlete empowerment as a tool which is not to be used when the stakes are highest.

The third iteration of athlete-centred coaching outside of the playing field that coaches identified in my interviews involved building trust and relationships with athletes. Kidman and Lombardo (2010) established that these relationships are integral to successful athlete-centred coaching as "in an athlete-centred approach to coaching this trust must be mutual, and establishing it is largely dependent upon the coach" (p. 23). The coaches I interviewed expressed several factors which complicated the effective formation of these relationships, including the hierarchical communication structure they implemented to foster team leadership.

Ruth, who had weekly meetings with captains, expressed the difficulties she had with communicating with the other athletes in part due to this hierarchical structure. "It doesn't work well. What I've found more recently is as I've gotten older the natural drift for them to come sit down and chat with me has disappeared" (Ruth). While Ruth acknowledged that taking time to have conversations with athletes outside of her leadership group is important, the busy schedule of the season makes it difficult to do so. As a result, players who are not in leadership roles do not get the same opportunities to have conversations, and develop relationships and trust with their coaches. Rather, coaches like Ruth rely on captains, and the leadership hierarchy, to act as a "conduit between players and coaches" (Ruth).

In effect, the players most enabled to develop trusting relationships with coaches are those that occupy the highest positions in the team's hierarchy. Those not in these positions rely on their performance within the structured normative expectations of the team as an opportunity to earn trust. In a sense, an athlete's ability to successfully embody the expectations of observing hierarchy and normalizing judgement (Foucault

1995) enables them to benefit from further empowerment opportunities. This structure utilizes discipline to promote and cyclically reward the behaviours that a coach trusts, potentially undermining the intentional empowerment of coach-athlete relationships.

Several other coaches, including Dave, Sean, Blake, and Harold, stated explicitly that developing relationships with younger players was challenging. This trend seemed to be especially pronounced in large teams, and teams with relatively short seasons. Sean, whose team is relatively small and whose season lasts for the majority of the school year, intentionally addressed these difficulties structurally by meeting with all team members in smaller groups. By separating these groups by age, Sean attempted to ensure that the younger players had ample opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with him. He intentionally met with his first-year players every week. "Most of the individual meetings are about school and life, so that I know that they're doing ok, and I'm checking in on homesickness and academics" (Sean). In these conversations, he attempted to "steer clear of letting (sport) lead this conversation".

Sean's strategy does not altogether avoid the tendency towards discipline created by structured hierarchy. For instance, older players were still given "a lot of power in the team for who they will be and how things are policed". Furthermore, Sean put transfer players in the same group as the first year players "where I have to teach them how we live", demonstrating a level of homogeneity required from these athletes. However, ensuring a development of trust by intentionally setting aside the specifics of sport performance is a demonstrably athlete-centred approach to fostering a healthy coach-athlete relationship.

On the other hand, Harold suggested that the pressure to perform further complicated his ability to build trusting relationships with his athletes.

> I tend to target my time where I see it's needed. To be honest, you probably spend more time on the people that are dedicated and going to be integral to the success of the program. Where you've got a person who's super dedicated but isn't going to cut it, eventually you do start to go elsewhere because the writing is on the wall and it would be a negative value to put your energy somewhere there's not going to be a benefit on the other side (Harold)

Harold reinforced the complicating effect of playing ability on the ability of coaches to develop trusting relationships with their athletes as an athlete-centred practice. While he was forthcoming in describing what could be seen as a cutthroat attitude resulting from performance pressures, other coaches are likely to experience similar difficulties. The traditional measures of sporting success, in this case the pressure to win, seem to compromise the implementation of athlete-centred coaching.

The complications and pressures coaches experienced in utilizing athlete-centred philosophies were not unique to strategies away from the playing field. My third and final theme highlights the ways in which these coaches attempted to empower their athletes on the field, and how more disciplinary coaching techniques reappeared in various playing contexts.

**Athlete-Centred Coaching on the Playing Field**

The implementation of athlete-centred coaching on the playing field was similarly complicated by the different contexts of university sport. The coaches identified several different strategies that they employed in attempting to encourage athletes to make

decisions, and ultimately to improve their performance. However, in nearly every case the implementation of these tactics was tempered by a need to adjust in relation to context. Most frequently, coaches identified a need to take back control from the athletes when the pressure to perform was highest.

In this theme, I outline the three concepts related to athlete-centred coaching specific to performance on the playing field that the coaches most clearly articulated. First, I will discuss the concept of control, which the coaches expressed as an important tool to balance over the course of a season. Second, coaches identified the use of open-concept drill work in addition to the importance of video study in encouraging explorative, rather than directive, learning. Finally, I highlight how coaches discussed the pressure to perform and its effects on the utilization of athlete-centred tactics. These three concepts are somewhat fluid, and frequently interacted in the discourse used by coaches in discussing the use of athlete-centredness on the playing field. Ultimately, athlete-centredness was used situationally and was frequently compromised by more disciplinary practices intended to ensure successful performance.

The idea of maintaining control while still attempting to empower athletes was a difficult balancing act for coaches. Mary pointed out that the utilization of athlete-centred tactics may open the coach up for criticism based on leniency, or an appearance of lacking control.

> There's an illusion that because you are athlete-centred… I think I'm a humanistic coach, that you're soft. You still have to be in charge. I would never want anyone to think I'm not in control. I'm in control. They know who the boss is. (Mary)

Although acknowledging the potential benefits of an athlete-centred approach, Mary suggested that her athletes were acutely aware of her authority and influence. This insight further demonstrates that athlete-centredness is used primarily as a tool, rather than an all-encompassing philosophy. The maintenance of control, and particularly the appearance of maintaining control, was an important part of using athlete-centred tactics for Mary. Erik identified a similar pressure in his experience.

> We want to feel like we're in control still. When you stop going back to the players and lose sight of that, you go back to the more old-school method of coaching when the pressure comes on, but really you need to be a little braver and put more trust in the players. (Erik)

Citing a need for bravery in giving up control to athletes in Erik's case, or to avoid being perceived as "soft" because of using athlete-centred tactics, both of these coaches highlighted important pressures related to traditional coaching discourses. Despite an acknowledgement that athlete-centred coaching is beneficial, pressures to maintain control affected the perspective and behaviours of these coaches. "Society does not expect coaches to be facilitators; the stereotypical coach is loud and commanding, has an obvious presence, knows everything or at least acts that way and knows how to make decisions, is organized and has a 'take-charge' personality" (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010, p. 40).

Beyond these broader social preconceptions, the pressures to maintain control that Erik and Mary expressed are indicative of a disciplinary environment. For instance, Erik stated "It's difficult to give that control over to the players because we want to show them

exactly what needs to happen," a sentiment which closely mirrors the analysis of Denison (2007), who used Foucault to analyze his own coaching of a high level distance runner.

> It is apparent to me now that getting Brian to talk about his tactical awareness, and specifically his tactical weaknesses, became a way for me - the expert assigned to interpret his confession - to control his race. The more he confessed what he did or did not know about tactics, the easier it was for me to prescribe techniques (interventions) to mould him into my vision of a productive competitor. It was in this way, accordingly, that I might have stripped Brian of his athletic identity such that he entered his race with little or no sense of why he was running or who he was running for. (Denison, 2007, p. 378).

By actively maintaining control and authority in their decision making, despite acknowledging the need to empower their athletes, the traditional discourse of a coach as an expert distributor of knowledge goes unchallenged. Despite good intentions, the maintenance of this disciplinary structure undermines the efficacy of attempts to coach in an athlete-centred way. Rather than creating an environment of empowerment and discovery, the social pressures and expectations which coaches feel contribute to the need for them to maintain control. Even when these coaches expressed knowledge of the benefits of athlete empowerment, and an intention to utilize such an approach, the particular social context of the coaching discourse in university sport made these practices difficult.

Sean identified a change in his coaching practices as a result of the negative unintended consequences of controlling coaching. Prior to the change, Sean tracked and displayed his athletes' workout sessions outside of scheduled practice times in order to

ensure that the athletes were completing their work. However, the effects of this practice on his athletes was problematic, prompting him to make a change. "The public display… it just got weird internally. I stopped posting all of that. I think they got a little self-conscious" (Sean). Continuing, Sean said that the tactic of tracking and displaying workouts ultimately "shamed" athletes, rather than positively reinforcing behavior as he initially intended. Several disciplinary techniques could contribute to the problems Sean identified as resulting from this practice, including the normalizing gaze and its' homogenizing effects, hierarchical observation as a reinforcement of disciplined behavior, and a public examination (Foucault, 1995). Through these techniques, an athlete is deprived of their own ability to make decisions, and is rather formed into a predictable, efficient member of the team because of the social processes which reward normalized behavior. Among the potential drawbacks of these controlling measures is docility, wherein individuals become "cogs in a system" whose capacity to become active and engaged subjects is compromised (Foucault, 1995). The behaviours Sean may have identified as "self-consciousness" or "shame" could result from the docile-inducing disciplinary forces of observation and control. Foucault (1995) described docile bodies as those "in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, or obligations" (p. 136). The imposition of discipline "made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility" (Foucault, 1995, p. 137). Through this process, athlete behavior can be policed while individuality, creativity, and decision making become devalued. While these effects contribute to predictability and efficiency, the negative consequences of discipline on the individual athlete run counter to the

purpose of athlete empowerment initiatives. Sean's recognition of the unintended consequences of his coaching tactics, as well as his willingness to make a change, represent an athlete-centred approach that, although unintentionally in this case, could be informed by Foucauldian informed sport sociologists such as Denison (2007). However, other coaches had a more difficult time utilizing athlete-centredness in relation to their own control.

Mary, discussed her use of athlete-centred tactics following a poor performance. "Sometimes you feel like you're just dishing it off for them to reflect and make behavioural changes. Some teams do it and it goes well, and others just couldn't bring themselves to do it. Frankly I think it's on them." Placing the burden of poor performance or an inability to adjust on the athlete is representative of the concerns about athlete empowerment expressed by Denison et al. (2017), wherein coaching tactics are rooted in "increased personal responsibility and accountability on the part of the less powerful" (p. 10). While an athlete may be "empowered to regulate him- or herself in the same way that his or her coaches would", an athlete who fails under a supposedly athlete-centred coaching model may be perceived as "clearly not mature or responsible enough to produce the correct result on his or her own and therefore needing to have his or her coach reassert or increase his or her control" (Denison et al., 2017). Because of this structure, the traditional discourse of coaching, wherein the coach is the primary distributor of knowledge, is undisturbed.

Similarly to Mary, Jason expressed the importance of maintaining control while highlighting athlete responsibility.

> I've honestly found that the more structured we have things around here the better it goes. One of the biggest dysfunctions for young men is their brains aren't ready to be organized yet. A big part of it is creating a good framework and structure for kids so that their work is taken care of. I've found that in an absence of structure you get failure. (Jason)

Much like Sean had previously, Jason implemented a structure in which he controls athlete behavior through scheduling and tracking athlete workouts. While productive, this structure uses what Foucault (1995) might identify as the 'control of activity', wherein time is used exhaustively in order to maximize efficiency. The control of activity can be used as a means of promoting athlete behavior that is predictable and efficient, but not questioning, curious, or empowered. While athlete-centredness is professed to encourage these more holistic traits, the control of activity contributes to a body influenced by authority "rather than imbued with animal spirits; a body of useful training and not of rational mechanics, but one in which, by virtue of that very fact, a number of natural requirements and functional constraints are beginning to emerge" (Foucault, 1995, p. 155).

Pressure to maintain control, and a tendency to place the responsibility of failure on the athletes, represents the resoluteness of traditional disciplinary coaching despite athlete-centred intentionality. While the idea of control addressed the athlete-centred approaches on the playing field generally, several coaches delved into further specifics. Dave discussed a conversation with two of his captains regarding the type of drill work they thought was most beneficial in practice. Rather than strictly structured tactical work, the athletes preferred small area games, where play is free flowing and "principle

based" (Dave). Dave discussed these two drill structures as somewhat of a dichotomy, wherein small area games provided an opportunity for free-flowing, explorative learning, but tactical work was highly directive and structured. Although he does provide input in both formats, he describes tactical work as "let's get the reps in and make sure they're as close to perfection as possible in my mind" (Dave).

It is perhaps unsurprising that athletes prefer principle based, free flowing drills in part because of the potential to create docility in highly disciplinary contexts. In striving for "perfection", Dave stated that he was more likely to step in and provide directive feedback. Through the strict monitoring of space, time, and movement, the discipline of tactical coaching embodies the "mechanics of power" wherein the body can be controlled "not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines" (Foucault, p. 138). Unlike more open, principle-based drill work, the directive feedback a coach provides in this setting is more likely to closely monitor and enforce normalized expectations of space, time, and movement. Foucault (1995) showed that the "composition of forces" exerted through these methods of discipline treat the body as a machine, producing predictability and efficiency. However, this process does not effectively address the intention of athlete-centred coaching to empower athletes and increase decision making.

Dave thought that this type of coaching was necessary, but tried to maintain a balance with athlete-centred tactics geared towards athlete decision making. However, when the team was slower than expected in achieving success at a given skill, more directive tactics remained the most frequently utilized. "At the end of the day we're

never going to be perfect and we'll have ups and downs. I try to have an understanding of that. If it's an ongoing issue then I might change and become a little more directive as a result" (Dave).

Blake also identified time as an important factor related to when he might abandon open-ended questioning for more directive coaching techniques. "I know that the theory and everything says the best thing is to ask them the question and let them discover that. You try to do that when you can. Sometimes it's a time issue, or sometimes they're just not getting it" (Blake). Going so far as to acknowledge that "it's probably not the best coaching", Blake still found himself reverting to directive, coach-centred practices because of the pressure to achieve performance outcomes as quickly and efficiently as possible. Despite both knowledge of the potential benefits of athlete-centred coaching, and an intentionality to empower athletes for the benefit of both their individual development and the team's performance, traditional 'old-school' coaching tactics repeatedly took precedence for these coaches.

Harold also utilized questioning as an athlete-centred approach on the court, a tactic highlighted by Kidman and Lombardo (2010).

> I think each rep in practice, the more we're talking to them, asking them why we're running a set, as the (sport) IQ grows they're able to make these decisions. They might say 'this week in practice coach was reminding us to get it inside so we'll call this play.' (Harold)

Although a practice intended to be athlete-centred, the execution in this instance further demonstrates the ingrained, disciplinary logic of traditional approaches, as well as their resoluteness despite empowering intentionality. Rather than utilizing questioning as a

means of teaching athletes to make their own informed decisions, Harold appeared to use this practice as a vessel to reinforce his own coaching power by reminding his athletes of his own voice in a game scenario. Furthermore, the method in which Harold utilized questioning as an athlete-centred practice may not effectively empower athletes. Kidman and Lombardo (2010) suggested that "It is not simply a matter of asking questions; effective coach questioning requires purposeful questions phrased in a way that encourages the athlete to respond" (p. 26). When I asked Harold whether such an opportunity was allotted to athletes, he suggested that the exercise was rhetorical, and that the answer was quickly provided by the coach. Once again, while Harold attempted to utilize athlete-centredness as a means of empowerment, "coaching's dominant discursive formation largely goes untouched" (Denison et al., 2017, p. 10).

The use of video as a coaching tool was also frequently identified as a means of empowering athletes and encouraging decision making. Mary described changing her practices in a particular drill, wherein an athlete performs a skill for a minute straight. Previous to the change, the coach provided feedback during and after the drill, however as a means of encouraging athlete autonomy, the athletes now watch their repetitions on video delay.

> They used to rely on the coach to tell them what the quality of their set was. I used to have complete control over it because I would tell them whether it was good or not, but now it's shifted more for them to tell me what they saw. (Mary)

While this change is intended to increase athlete responsibility and decision making, the use of video has also been criticized as disciplinary by sport sociologists. While it is true that the process of analysis and provision of feedback is shifted away from the coach, the

structure of surveillance created by self-analysis can still contribute to athlete docility, wherein the individual is reduced to an unthinking, yet predictable and efficient, cog in the machine. Taylor (2015) has suggested that by analyzing video, the athlete is subjected to the normalizing gaze and is disciplined not only by the coach, but through the internalization of normative behavior within their sport. The disciplinary power enacted in this practice is not wielded by the coach, but is rather relational, wherein the expected behavior is reinforced and normalized through video surveillance. In this way, the "athlete-centred" approach of athlete self-analysis through video "is actually more about making athletes obedient and responsible not critical, questioning, independent and creative" (Denison, 2017, p. 8). Without coaches further examining the disciplinary underpinnings of these "athlete-centred" coaching tactics, it is unlikely that the alleged benefits of such practices will be realized.

Finally, coaches explicitly identified the importance of performance results late in the season as a factor inhibiting their use of athlete-centred coaching. While athlete-centred tactics were frequently used as a tool in low-stakes settings, coaches frequently reverted to more disciplinary, 'coach-centred' approaches when the pressure to win was highest. Blake suggested that while there was a time for explorative learning as a means of empowering athletes and encouraging decision making, the pressure of playoffs and the need to perform well led him to change his approach.

> Now we get two weeks of preseason. That would be the period of time for open-learning, where we let them try things. But if you're coming up to playoffs, OK I've got these 3-4 things that need to get done, so you're more directive and coach-driven. (Blake)

While Blake recognized that athlete-centred ideals are potentially beneficial, they did not seem to be the primary driver of his decision making, as the control he was able to exert through more directive tactics was more relevant to his priorities, namely winning and performance.

Ruth echoed Blake's sentiments in discussing an open-concept, explorative learning opportunity she utilized to develop her teams strategy following a kick-off. In the drill, the athletes were given the opportunity to repeatedly play-out the scenario with minimal structure provided from the coach in order to develop a more in-depth understanding of the tactical decisions available.

> I'd like to go back to them and see what they learned. I'm hoping that they had some key takeaways to say 'this is what we could do' because they learned something from that moment. Ultimately in order to win in a big final, I think the tactics and holding people to task is more important. (Ruth)

Once again, although Ruth articulated the potential benefits of athlete-centred coaching, she preferred a more disciplinary tactical approach when the stakes were the highest. Rather than a 'philosophy', athlete-centred coaching is utilized as a tool to encourage learning when there is little pressure to perform on the field. Kidman and Lombardo (2010) identified this tendency as a drawback of the "professional model of sport".

> The financial and employment security of several individuals, including the coach, are dependent on athletes performing well and winning championships. In these circumstances the personal, cognitive/psychological and social development of the athlete is of lower priority than the more tangible performance goals. (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010, p. 43)

While not truly a "professional" sporting environment, the difficulties university coaches identified in implementing athlete-centred coaching, and the reversion to more disciplinary approaches in high pressure situations, indicates that this context much more closely resembles a professional environment than an educational environment.

Beyond the reappearance of directive, disciplinary tactics when the pressure was highest during a season, coaches identified increased stress which affected their use of athlete-centred coaching through their relationships with players, as noted by Kidman and Lombardo (2010). Dave mentioned that two of his captains had noticed a change in his demeanor and approached him.

> When it's playoff time I become more stressed. It feels like we're not where we have been in the past in term of system execution and little details. I become more directive and they noticed that. My understanding is they're becoming more aware of my stress and becoming more anxious, and came to talk to me about it. (Dave)

Dave expressed that the effects of performance pressure on his behavior led him to more directive, disciplinary coaching styles. In this case, his anxiety and altered coaching behavior led his captains to suggest that athlete-centred, free flowing drills would benefit the team. However, it is clear that Dave was aware of the tangible effects that the pressure to win had on his demeanor and coaching tactics. Harold expressed a similar experience in grappling with the pressure for the team to perform.

> It's a battle. It's a constant battle to not let it affect who you are as a person and how you interact. You wake up in the morning and it's a struggle to check in with people and be on good terms. You've just got this burden that shouldn't be there

but you put it there. It affects your interactions and who you are as a person. (Harold)

Given the importance of trusting relationships between athletes and coaches in athlete-centred coaching (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010), the degree to which performance pressure seemed to compromise coaching demeanor and tactics further demonstrates the significant roadblocks which hinder the use of athlete-centred tactics in university sport.

**Summary**

Throughout this chapter I have outlined three themes from my interviews with eight university sport head coaches that suggest the effective implementation of athlete-centred coaching tactics in this context is at best difficult and complicated, and at worst impossible. Social influences and power structures contribute to the reappearance of disciplinary coaching techniques which replace athlete-centred intentions as coaches maintain control in an effort to ensure their team performs at the highest levels. Rather than a true 'philosophy', athlete-centred tactics are used selectively when stakes are lowest in attempting to produce a particular outcome.

As a result, the evidence I have provided in this chapter suggests that athlete-centred coaching may not be straightforward to successfully implement in the manner that many proponents have advocated. However, the negative consequences of highly disciplinary coaching are well established, and still need to be addressed. In my concluding chapter, I outline how a post-structuralist approach to coaching which subverts the ingrained disciplinary legacy of high-performance sport could utilize aspects of athlete-centredness in improving athlete experience, without sacrificing performance. Without an informed, critical approach which fundamentally alters the epistemological

approach to coaching knowledge, the problematic consequences of discipline will continue to go unaddressed.

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# Chapter 5: Conclusion

Informed by my own experiences as a varsity athlete and an academic curiosity about the social process of sport coaching, my research project aimed to shed light on how university team sport coaches came to understand and utilize athlete-centred coaching in their daily practice. In a field wherein traditional approaches have been highly disciplined, athlete-centred approaches to coaching aim to holistically empower athletes as a means of improving both experience and performance. While this practice had been well-documented in recreational and educational settings, research supporting its efficacy in high-performance sporting environments had not been well-established. Utilizing interviews with eight head coaches, I have critically analyzed both the formation and implementation of athlete-centred knowledge in the university sport context through a Foucauldian lens.

In this concluding chapter, I address the significant difficulties these coaches encountered in attempting to utilize athlete-centred approaches, while linking my own research findings to previous coaching literature. In doing so, I highlight the need for fundamental changes to the established coaching discourse in order for the well-intentioned goals of athlete-centred approaches to be realized. Based on my findings I recommend practices grounded in poststructuralism which utilize Foucauldian informed approaches to promote more ethical and effective coaching at the university level.

## The Gap Between Intention and Practice

The first of the three research questions which I attempted to address in my study queried the ways in which coaches understood and implemented athlete-centred coaching

practices. The results of my study suggest that, rather than being aligned as I had initially anticipated, there was a considerable gap between the ways that coaches understood and implemented athlete-centred philosophy. As a result of this gap, well-intentioned practices which were aimed to empower athletes frequently maintained traditional methods of practice which were counteractively disciplinary and restrictive. For instance, the 'empowerment' of athletes through a hierarchical leadership structure contributed to a culture of homogenization and surveillance wherein behaviour was normalized. Rather than encouraging exploration and individuality, the power enacted by this structure permeated the group, incentivizing behaviour which fit within the norm. As Foucault (1995) argued, normalization serves to establish a predictable and efficient order by "indicating membership of a homogeneous social body but also playing a part in classification, hierarchization and the distribution of rank" (p. 184). Importantly, this deeply ingrained traditional logic repeatedly appeared despite the intention to empower.

My second research question aimed to illuminate how, if at all, instances of athlete-centred coaching departed from the problematic disciplinary framework of high-performance sport. In this area, my findings align with the position held by Denison et al. (2017) that within the disciplinary framework of high-performance sport coaching, the utilization of athlete-centredness and other empowerment initiatives may simply be rhetoric, rather than a philosophy which meaningfully subverts problematic traditional practice. Furthering this notion were the repeated uses of athlete-centredness as a tool through which to create motivation. While coaches like Mary and Blake suggested that empowering athletes could increase athlete buy-in, these opportunities were employed selectively and strategically. Rather than a foundational philosophy underpinning their

practice, these coaches used athlete-centred coaching opportunistically as a means of producing a particular result from their athletes. In this sense, the dominant discursive formation of maximum coach control is not fundamentally changed. Athletes are not truly empowered, but are rather given responsibility and autonomy in particular settings wherein the coach deems this practice beneficial. Ultimately, the coach remains the primary decision making force in this arrangement, while the athlete is able to explore and make decisions in a significantly limited capacity

Because the dominant formation of coaching practice was not subverted in the selective use of athlete-centred practice, it is unsurprising that potentially problematic disciplinary practices consistently reappeared. While coaches articulated the potential benefits of an athlete-centred approach, the tendency to revert to more traditional methods is perhaps due to the ways in which coaches have come to know about athlete-centredness. Whether through coach education programs, or through informal learning from mentor coaches or as athletes themselves, the dominant formation of the coach as having and distributing legitimized knowledge is unquestioned. In order for meaningful athlete empowerment to be possible, the logic underpinning this discourse needs to be destabilized. While the coaches in my study repeatedly stated their intention to empower their athletes, social structures empowering coaches were so ingrained that when the stakes were raised these individuals were quick to revert to coach-centred practices. Rather than a 'quick fix' approach to improve athlete decision making and performance, my investigation into athlete-centred coaching in this context revealed that coach control was so entrenched as to make athlete empowerment through this method incredibly difficult, if not impossible.

**Performance Pressure**

My final research question investigated how the specific varying contexts of university sport affected the delivery of athlete-centred coaching. While coaches expressed various difficulties, including the complications of coaching a team and varying levels of athlete experience, my findings suggest that the most obvious detractor from the use of athlete-centred coaching in the university context that coaches identified was the pressure to win. Although proponents of athlete-centred coaching suggest that encouraging athlete empowerment and decision making will increase performance, coaches struggled to continue the use of athlete-centred approaches when stakes increased. Once again, this suggests that the dominant logic which maintains coach control has not been sufficiently undermined so that a true athlete-centred philosophy is possible.

As it relates to the specific settings wherein coaches employ athlete-centred approaches, it is noteworthy that these opportunities were more acutely developed and intentionally employed in settings away from the playing field. Coaches seemed more equipped to increase athlete investment by attempting to enable leadership and decision making when these opportunities were not explicitly tied to performance. Although some structures maintained disciplinary traits such as hierarchical observation, every coach stated their intention to empower athletes through various methods of peer leadership and accountability. This widespread trend was much less pronounced when considering athlete-centred practices on the playing field.

Kidman and Lombardo (2010) described the "professional model of sport" as a pressure which creates difficulty in utilizing athlete-centred practices. The findings in

my study closely mirror this assertion, as coaches are highly incentivized to perform at the highest levels and to win. The consequences of poor performance are severe, and could lead to a loss of employment and the livelihood of these coaches. Despite the notion that athlete-centred coaching and performance are not mutually exclusive, the pressure to perform at the highest level leads coaches to exert their own control, rather than enabling athletes. By exerting disciplinary power, outcomes are made more efficient and predictable (Foucault, 1995), which may seem less risky to coaches whose continued employment depends on winning games.

While university sport serves a dual purpose as an educational and competitive setting, my findings suggest that coaches perceive this context to more closely mirror the professional model of sport than an educational tool. It seems apparent that the more holistic goals of athlete-centred coaching and their emergence primarily in the youth sport and education literature are perceived as less relevant to the high-performance sporting context wherein coaches utilize disciplinary power's predictability and efficiency to attempt to maximize performance, even if this is to the detriment of individual athlete development and experience.

**A Better Way Forward?**

Despite having problematized how athlete-centred coaching is currently understood and implemented in university team sport, there is much to be optimistic about as it relates to the development of athlete-empowerment initiatives and how they can positively affect effective and ethical sport coaching going forward. By attempting to empower athletes, improve decision making, and enact a more holistic approach to sport, athlete-centred coaching attempts to address the negative consequences of traditionally

disciplinary coaching environments. Although the results of my study suggest that there is still a great deal of work to do in order to surpass the problematic consequences resulting from the disciplinary legacy of high-performance sport, the intentions of athlete-centred initiatives are a step in the right direction.

Furthermore, the coaches in my study expressed important sentiments about the benefits of athlete-empowerment. While I have been critical of many potentially disciplinary practices throughout my analysis, I firmly believe that these coaches have the best interest of their athletes at the forefront of their decision making. Because of this, it is entirely possible for changes to be made which can benefit athletes, coaches, and performance alike.

As I have alluded repeatedly, the traditional disciplinary logic of old school coaching is so firmly entrenched within the broader discourse that it compromises the delivery of seemingly novel approaches, like athlete-centredness. As Denison et al. (2017) detail,

> It is quite easy for coaches to say that they coach in an athlete-centered way without changing much at all—how they organize and manage (read discipline) the bodies in front of them every day. This is largely because of the power that sport psychology has acquired to provide coaches with ready-made approaches to becoming more effective. (p. 10)

As evidenced by the difficulties coaches faced in using athlete-centred coaching in this study, the ready made approaches which Denison et al. (2017) refer to can maintain or replicate the problematic tendencies of traditional coaching, rather than making fundamental and meaningful change. In order to make progress towards a more ethical

and effective coaching practice, the underlying logic informing coaching knowledge must be challenged. For instance, many of the disciplinary techniques which coaches continue to use in my study have been demonstrated to carry consequences which run counter to the attributes that make an athlete successful. While Foucault (1995) exhibited how discipline increases efficiency and predictability, he also clearly outlined how discipline can contribute to the creation of docile bodies. What a coach may believe is in the best interest of their athletes, in part due to the prevalence of disciplinary practices in the entrenched coaching discourse, may actually contribute to athletes who lack creativity, experience burnout, and have trouble making independent decisions. That practices contributing to these outcomes appeared repeatedly throughout my study, despite coaches employing athlete-centred coaching approaches intended to foster creativity and decision making, only further highlights the need to think differently.

This is not to say that ethical coaching requires abandonment of the dominant discourse, but rather that this discourse should be continuously problematized in order to better understand the effects that it has on the body, the athlete, and the team. Without a doubt, the expertise of a coach and the feedback they provide athletes are integral to the experience of sport. In order to coach ethically, however, a coach must carefully consider how and when they are providing structure, feedback, and direction, and what unintended consequences might be created through this process. Based on the results of my study, coaches are quick to uncritically seize back control from their athletes, or not provide the opportunity for empowerment at all.

Denison et al. (2017) suggested that successfully coaching with Foucault may require a reframing of the purpose of sport as a whole. While Foucault (1995) has shown

how discipline fixes, arrests, and regulates the body, are these the goals of sport? On the contrary, coaches and athletes alike seem more likely to benefit from curious, questioning, thinking, engaged participation. This notion seems even more relevant in the particular context of university varsity athletics where there is an important interplay of education, personal development, and competitive excellence. Fundamentally, coaches do not need to sacrifice performance by empowering their athletes. Rather, coaching with a more holistic understanding of the negative effects that disciplinary power can have relative to the goals of sport performance can foster an environment where athletes are more engaged decision makers, benefitting both experience and performance.

Practically speaking, creating an empowered environment as a Foucauldian informed coach would involve constant reflection, curiosity, and questioning rather than a passive acceptance and application of practices which are widely accepted. A departure from the traditional, linear logic of sport coaching would require consideration of the fluid, ambiguous social factors which affect sport performance. Clearly such an approach would come with its own challenges, including a basis of knowledge in Foucauldian theory or Foucauldian informed sport research. In the same way that athlete-centred coaching has recently entered the coach education curriculum, the further advancement of Foucauldian informed sport sociology research into this area could benefit future practice. By treating coaching as a social process requiring constant reflection, critique, and self-awareness, Foucauldian informed coaches can account for the existing power relations in traditional approaches, and work towards truly empowering their athletes. However, such a transformation does not seem possible without a fundamental change to

the way in which coaching has been traditionally discussed and taught. Without a degree of departure from the almost exclusively linear, scientific logic informing coaching practices, the benefits of athlete-empowered initiatives in high-performance contexts will continue to be limited.

The implementation of more sociologically informed sport science research in coach education curricula could be impactful in creating more ethical and effective coaching practice. Several coaches in my study, including Dave and Erik, identified a need for more opportunities to learn about the potential impacts of discipline in coaching practice, as well as strategies to avoid such tactics. Furthermore, the importance of experiential learning and mentor coaches as a part of shaping coach practice exacerbates the negative impacts of uncritical traditional practice. If coaches are to effectively depart from traditionally disciplinary coaching, these ideas must disturb the established discourse not only through coach education, but through the example set by coaches' peers and mentors.

While my research delved into how coaches understood and utilized athlete-centred coaching, there are several areas of this topic which could benefit from closer examination. One area of particular interest to me is the experience of the athletes in team sports where the coach utilized athlete-centred approaches. While I found that coaches often struggled in attempting to use athlete-centredness, it would be useful to hear firsthand from athletes how such approaches did or did not benefit their own experiences, especially when compared to well-documented studies criticizing disciplinary coaching and its affects on athlete experience (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Denison, 2007). Beyond these future directions, the application of more of

Foucault's work to the context of high-performance sport would be informative and beneficial. Scholars like McCuaig, Ohman, and Wright (2013) have applied the Foucauldian analytic of pastoral power to health and physical education contexts, calling for educators to "employ more intense strategies of individualization such as togetherness, encouragement and familiarity" when participants deviate from the norm. A similar study in the realm of high-performance sport could further inform practice, as well as call attention to the important social factors contributing to successful coaching, in this unique context.

Several other factors not addressed in my study demand further attention, including the effects of gender, as well as the specific utilization of athlete-centred coaching in individual sports. It would be interesting to find out what differences exist between male and female coaches in utilizing athlete-empowerment, as well as how these approaches might impact male and female athletes differently.

University sport is a powerful and important experience for coaches and athletes alike. My own varied experiences as a player showed me the wide range of possibilities that the social context of sport can provide. While at times educational, empowering, and rewarding, the challenging milieu of university sport can be equally damaging and frustrating. As coaches, navigating the challenges of this environment is complicated by myriad factors, including the team dynamic, the needs of individual athletes, and the pressure to win. Ultimately, by demonstrating the complicated processes contributing to difficulty in the delivery of athlete-centred coaching, I am hopeful that the results of this study might help to encourage more informed, critical, holistic coaching practices. Rather than a trade-off, I am hopeful that coaching differently by considering social

contexts and individual needs, and questioning approaches which have been taken for granted, can benefit not only the experience of the athlete and coach but also performance. By fundamentally changing the paradigm through which coaches approach their practice, coaches can strive for a more ethical and effective practice.

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**Appendix A: Interview Guide**

## Interview Guide

**You have received an information letter describing this study in detail. Do you have any questions or would you like any additional details?**

**Do you agree to participate in this study knowing that you can withdraw at any point during the interview with no consequences to you?**

**Introduce myself**: Playing and coaching background, Thesis project, Interest in athlete-centred coaching as a potentially beneficial coaching practice and the lack of knowledge about how it is implemented in high-performance settings.

**General Questions**: Coaching/Sporting background

- How long have you been coaching your sport at the university?

- What is your sporting/playing background in the sport you coach?

In this interview, I will be asking you specific questions about how you've come to understand and use athlete-centredness in various scenarios of your coaching.

**Theme 1: Understanding and implementing athlete-centred coaching in practice.**

1. Where did you learn about athlete-centred coaching (e.g. NCCP, NSO's, academia, other coaches), and what does it mean to you?

2. What is your understanding of the benefits of athlete-centred coaching?

3. What are some ways that you attempt to empower athletes in your coaching?
    - Describe examples of these instances in detail.

4. How do these instances of athlete-centred coaching and athlete empowerment relate to the specific goals of varsity sport? (e.g. performance and/or athlete development/holistic development)

**Theme 2: Departing from the disciplinary legacy of high-performance sport.**

1. How does athlete-centredness affect the delivery or content of training sessions (if at all)?

2. How often are your practices scripted?
    - What are the differences between scripted and unscripted practices (e.g. benefits, timing)?

3. Does your team ever have training sessions where you are not present?
    - How would you like such a session to look?

4. What is the role of seniority, or hierarchy, in your team?

5. How are any of your athlete-centred practices implemented as routines?
    - Could you describe what these practices look like in detail?

6. What is your experience with athlete frustration and burnout?
    - What do you think contributes to these instances?

7. How do you navigate the need to control your athletes, as opposed to encouraging them to explore?

**Theme 3: Varying contexts, difficulties, and pressures in athlete-centred coaching.**

1. How is athlete-centred coaching complicated by coaching a team?

2. What are the differences in how your practice is structured in the first few weeks of practice compared to the lead up to the most important game or competition of the year?

3. What differences are there in implementing athlete-centred coaching with an inexperienced player as opposed to a veteran?

4. How does the pressure to win affect your coaching in general, and specifically your use of athlete-centred coaching?

5. Who takes the lead in dealing with adversity during the season?

6. How does your coaching change as a result of poor performance results?

**Is there anything you'd like to add related to the topics we discussed? Thank you for your participation.**

## Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent

**INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM**

**Study Title: Athlete-Centred Coaching in University Sport: A Foucauldian Analysis**
**PRO #: 00086815**


**Research Investigator:**
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*Background*

- You are being invited to participate in this research project because of your position as the head coach of a varsity athletics program.
- The results of this study will be used in support of my Master's thesis, and will be published by the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation.

*Purpose*

- The purpose of this research is to investigate how athlete-centred coaching is used and understood by university sport coaches. By learning more about how this concept is utilized, I hope to allow coaches to be more informed in their practice and improve athletes' performance and experience.

*Study Procedures*

- The study will involve interviews with 8-10 coaches, each lasting around 90 minutes.
- The interview will be recorded and transcribed. These interviews will occur in a semi-public place of your choosing, where free flowing conversation is possible.
- Interviews will be semi-structured, meaning that I will use a list of themes and questions to guide the conversation.

*Benefits*

- While there are no direct benefits from participating in this study, it is possible that you will benefit from reflecting on your coaching practices.
- We hope that this research will contribute to improving coaching practices by encouraging coaches to reflect on the ways they use athlete-centred coaching, and come to a better understanding of the effects of their coaching practices on athletes.
- You will not receive any compensation for participation in this study.

*Risk*

- There are no known risks from participating in this study. While unlikely, it is possible that reflecting on your coaching practices may make you feel uncomfortable.

*Voluntary Participation*

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if you do participate in the study.

- Even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time. In the event of opting out, how will the withdrawal of data be handled? If you decide to withdraw after the interview session, we can remove all of your data from the study within one month of your interview date. We will continue to use the data we have collected if you decide to withdraw after more than one month has passed.

*Confidentiality & Anonymity*

- All of your identifying information will be removed from any publication of the research, so your participation will be confidential. If the data is to be used in future research, I will seek further REB approval first.
- Pseudonyms will be used so that you will not be identified. The name of your institution will also be removed.
- All interview recordings and transcriptions will be stored on a password protected hard drive available only to myself and my supervisor, Dr. Jim Denison. As per University of Alberta policy, this data is required to be stored for a minimum of 5 years. After this time period, the data will be destroyed.
- If you would like to, you can receive a final copy of the research findings. You can do so by contacting me directly using the information listed below.

***Further Information***

- If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact:


**Research Investigator:**
Geoff Pippus
Pippus@ualberta.ca
778-839-2412

**Supervisor**
Dr. Jim Denison
Jim.Denison@ualberta.ca
780-492-6824


- The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

**Consent Statement**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____ _____
Participant's Name (printed) and Signature Date

_____ _____
Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date