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Svenja Wachsmuth, Sophia Jowett, and Chris G. Harwood

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Managing Conflict in Coach−Athlete Relationships

Svenja Wachsmuth, Sophia Jowett, and Chris G. Harwood
Loughborough University

This study investigated coach−athlete conflict and focused on conflict management approaches used to minimize dysfunctional and maximize functional outcomes of interpersonal conflict. A qualitative approach to data collection enabled the researchers to explore various conflict management strategies used by the participants. Within the scope of the current study, 22 high-performance coaches and athletes took part in semistructured interviews. A thorough review of the recent literature (Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2017) informed the interview guide that consisted of 26 questions. A cross-case content analysis revealed that coaches and athletes prevent the onset of conflict by (a) facilitating good-quality relationships and optimal working environments (*implicit conflict prevention*) and (b) engaging in active conflict prevention strategies (*explicit conflict prevention*). Further, athletes and coaches appeared to manage conflict by using intra- and interpersonal strategies, as well as by seeking out external help. These strategies were found to be challenged by a range of conflict management barriers and associated with functional or dysfunctional performance and intra- and interpersonal outcomes. Overall, the role of the coach was central to managing conflict effectively.

Keywords: conflict resolution, communication, interpersonal skills, coaching effectiveness, personal development

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Over the years, the relevant literature has emphasized an athlete-centered approach (Becker, 2009), and more recently, a combined coach−athlete-centered (Jowett, 2017) or relational approach to coaching (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) has been forwarded. Together, these approaches underline the importance of recognizing and meeting athletes' needs by creating a performance environment that is interpersonal, containing characteristics such as support, care, acceptance, trust, commitment, and hardworking ethos (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis,

2012; Felton & Jowett, 2013). Despite coaches' and athletes' best intentions, there will be times when such coaching environments are inevitably disrupted by disagreements, misunderstandings, or conflicts. These disputes may be caused by not only unmet expectations, disagreements about training load or content, underperformance, or private life choices (D'Arripe-Longueville, Fournier, & Dubois, 1998; Kristiansen, Tomten, Hanstad, & Roberts, 2012) but also individual behaviors, such as coaches' rigid and autocratic leadership as well as belittling, volatile, or aggressive behaviors toward athletes (D'Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998; Gearity & Metzger, 2017). In addition, external factors such as cultural and social norms, media, sport organizations, or significant others may contribute to disturbances within coach−athlete interactions (Jowett, 2003; O'Malley, Winter, & Holder, 2017; Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2017, 2018).

In an attempt to collate the scarcely available research on coach−athlete conflict, Wachsmuth

Svenja Wachsmuth, Sophia Jowett, and Chris G. Harwood, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Svenja Wachsmuth, who is now at the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, Institute of Sport Sciences, Eberhard Karls University Tübingen, Wilhelmstraße 124, 72074 Tübingen, Germany. E-mail: svenja.wachsmuth@uni-tuebingen.de

et al. (2017) conducted a scoping review in which they defined interpersonal conflict as "a situation in which relationship partners perceive a disagreement about, for example, values, needs, opinions, or objectives that is manifested through negative cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions" (p. 89). As a result of the review, Wachsmuth et al. (2017) forwarded a conceptual framework of conflict within sport relationships describing a feedback loop that integrated conflict determinants, the nature and (potential) management, as well as outcomes of conflict. This framework suggests that the onset and nature of conflict are determined by external, intrapersonal, and interpersonal variables, as well as conflict parties' efforts to prevent conflict (e.g., communication). One of the assumptions that Wachsmuth and colleagues (2017) made was that if preventative strategies are not successful, then conflict parties are likely to engage in conflict management strategies that are either constructive or unconstructive, leading to different performance, intrapersonal, and interpersonal consequences of conflict. They concluded that ongoing conflict might undermine effective coach–athlete relationships (CARs) and can be detrimental to well-being, performance, and optimal sport development (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Ng, 2008; Kristiansen et al., 2012; Mellalieu, Shearer, & Shearer, 2013; Stebbings, Taylor, Spray, & Ntoumanis, 2012). Although there is an apparent lack of systematic research into conflict management within sport, the proposed framework may offer a scaffold for future research that could in turn contribute to more knowledge and better understanding about coach–athlete conflict.

Acknowledging that conflict is a psychological process with potential negative intra- and interpersonal outcomes, the literature thus far would seem to focus on preventing conflict in coach–athlete interactions. Jowett and Carpenter (2015), for example, underlined the importance of establishing rules to both preempt interpersonal conflict and facilitate the quality of the relationship. Although rules, such as keeping professional boundaries, commitment, and open communication, were identified (Jowett & Carpenter, 2015), the specific interpersonal behaviors associated with the rules that could have prevented the onset of conflict were not specified. In regard to communication, Rhind and

Jowett (2010) suggested multiple strategies that may help overcome some of the earlier stated problems and thus promote high-quality relationships. Moreover, Rhind and Jowett (2010) put forward the COMPASS model containing seven communication strategies aimed at developing and maintaining high-quality CARs, one of which referred to conflict management. Conflict management reflected efforts to identify, discuss, resolve, and monitor potential areas of disagreement. Although Rhind and Jowett (2010) touched upon the importance of tackling interpersonal conflict, they did not closely and systematically consider conflict management strategies. It is important to highlight that conflict will occur in every relationship regardless of its quality (Braiker & Kelley, 1979), and thus, its management should be an important concern for coaches and athletes.

In an effort to investigate interpersonal conflict in sport systematically, Mellalieu et al. (2013) assessed the frequency with which sport participants engaged in diverse conflict resolution strategies at major competitions. The authors reported that coaches, athletes, and other staff members tried to resolve conflict either alone or with the help of others, but most frequently, participants withdrew from conflict situations. It is plausible that sport participants avoided conflict due to the contextual circumstances (e.g., performance focus) presented to them at major competitions. Nonetheless, the literature indicates that conflict avoidance is a common strategy among athletes experiencing low-quality or even abusive relationships with their coaches (Gearity & Murray, 2011; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013) or due to the power relations perceived within the dyad (O'Malley et al., 2017; Gearity & Metzger, 2017). In addition, the power differentials between coaches and athletes as well as implicitly accepted biases may lead to negative effects in terms of power abuse, stereotyping, and microaggression (Gearity & Metzger, 2017; Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002; Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008; Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997) that can be viewed as conflict provoking. However, to the best of our knowledge, none of these studies investigated how resulting dysfunctional coach–athlete interactions may be managed.

One area that offers some insight into conflict management strategies, which may be directly transferred or adapted to the coaching context,

is group dynamics and its respective studies exploring intrateam conflict (Holt, Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012; Paradis, Carron, & Martin, 2014; Smith & Smoll, 1997). However, most recommendations have been made in response to investigations focusing on how conflict unfolds rather than on its actual management (Paradis et al., 2014). For example, it has been suggested that conflict may be best approached in a task-orientated manner by focusing on the actual problem rather than on personal attributes of the involved individuals (Holt et al., 2012). Furthermore, it has also been thought advantageous to encourage conflict partners to take perspective to establish a common ground to a problem; in doing so, it may provide opportunities to find solutions that meet everybody's needs and expectations (Hardy & Crace, 1997). Moreover, Holt and colleagues (2012) recommended that this process of collaboration should ideally be led by a neutral individual within a structured meeting to avoid conflict escalation. The reality, however, seems different: Taking the competitive nature of sport into account, it may be of little surprise that athletes tend to engage in competitive win−loss strategies to resolve conflict (Predoiu & Radu, 2013), whereas coaches may make use of controlling behaviors or use their authority to punish athletes, both emotionally and physically (D'Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998).

In conclusion, there is evidence in the current literature to indicate that conflict is likely to occur at some point within the context of the CAR (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). It further highlights that environmental factors can restrict coaches' and athletes' attempts to manage difficult interactions constructively (e.g., power distributions and low-quality relationships). Nonetheless, there is only little evidence-based information available on *how* coaches and athletes practically approach interpersonal disputes. Thus, although, for example, Mellalieu et al. (2013) offered a frequency count of strategies used to manage interpersonal conflict, no detailed information is provided about the quality and nature of these interactions. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to explore conflict prevention and management among high-performance coaches and athletes. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research questions: (a) *What* practical strategies do coaches and athletes use to prevent and man-

age interpersonal conflict and *how* do they implement these? (b) What conflict outcomes do coaches and athletes experience as a result of successful/unsuccessful conflict management? This research is warranted to substantiate and expand the limited understanding that is currently available of coach−athlete conflict on both theoretical and practical grounds (cf. Wachsmuth et al., 2017, 2018). The knowledge created can then contribute to coaches' and athletes' daily interactions by identifying practical mechanisms that can prevent dysfunctional conflict and promote beneficial consequences of conflict through its constructive management.

Method

Overall, this study is based on a pragmatic philosophical viewpoint according to which knowledge (i.e., warranted assertions) is formed through the actions and interactions of individuals within a given context (Dewey, 1922). A qualitative approach to data collection was deemed appropriate to capture the nature and quality of coach−athlete interactions in times of interpersonal conflict within high-performance sports. This study integrates various relevant viewpoints (i.e., coaches and athletes) and focuses on individuals' actions and their perceived consequences. Considering that the quality of pragmatic research is, among other criteria, judged based on its transferability into practice, the study's findings are expected to provide guidance for effective conflict management for sport participants and may facilitate the development of healthy and effective CARs that are vital to sport performance and well-being.

Participants

A purposeful sample was drawn for this study consisting of 11 coaches (nine male and two female) and 11 athletes (four male and seven female). Participants were chosen based on the following inclusion criteria to facilitate the collection of meaningful, rich data: First, potential participants were to confirm previous experiences of coach−athlete conflict. In addition, coaches and athletes had to be at least 18 years of age, as individuals' maturity is interlinked with the development of interpersonal skills and as such with conflict experiences (Birditt &

Fingerman, 2005). Finally, participants were required to perform at the national level or higher in their respective sports. Overall, participants performed in team (11; e.g., rugby, cricket, and volleyball) and individual (11; e.g., gymnastics, swimming, and athletics) sports and competed at the national (eight) or international (14) level (see Table 1 for detailed information). Participants originated from Great Britain (19), Romania (one), Slovenia (one), and Canada (one); however, all were competent English speakers and part of the British sport system.

Data Collection Procedure

After approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the researchers' institution, potential interviewees were contacted via standardized e-mails that provided information about the purpose, requirements, and ethical considerations of the study. Once participants consented to take part in the study, one-to-one interviews took place at a mutually convenient time and location. All interviews were audio-recorded, and short screening questionnaires were used to access demographic data such as personal information (e.g., age and gender), sport (e.g., performance level and training), and conflict experience ("How often have you experienced conflict with your athlete?"). It should be noted that this study forms part of a larger research project that explored coach−athlete conflict more broadly (see also Wachsmuth et al., 2018). The interview guide consisted of 26 questions based on a comprehensive review of the literature inside and outside the sport domain. Five topics were covered: (a) sport experience and CAR, (b) interpersonal conflict/concept, (c) determinants, (d) conflict experience, and (e) outcomes.

This article only captures information on 10 of the 26 questions revolving around conflict prevention (e.g., "How do you try to prevent conflict with your coach/ athlete?"), management (e.g., "How was the conflict managed?"), and consequences (e.g., "What happened after the conflict?"). Participants had an opportunity to draw upon various conflict experiences they have had with coaches or athletes in the past. At the end of the interview, all participants were invited to comment on any thoughts or information on the topic that had not been covered yet. The semistructured nature of the interview allowed for some degree of flexibility; thus, even though all areas of interest were covered in each interview, the order of the questions and prompts may have differed (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This approach ensured flowing conversations in which participants felt comfortable and motivated to share their experiences (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Interviews were carried out face to face, with the exception of one coach who was located in a distant part of the country. Interviews were conducted by the lead researcher who had previously undertaken qualitative research and whose personal involvement in sports (e.g., equestrian and triathlon) as well as experience in the work with athletes and coaches from a range of sports (e.g., futsal and volleyball) promoted rapport between the interviewer and the participants. The researcher further engaged in personal reflections and kept regular notes about the interview process to ensure high-quality interviews as well as to reflect upon the content of the interview. Data

Table 1
Participants' Demographics

	Coaches		Athletes	
Parameters	National	International[a]	National	International[b]
Individual	0	3	4	4
Team	3	5	1	2
M_{age} (in years)	45.80 ± 10.81		24.45 ± 3.31	
$M_{experience}$ (in years)	22.91 ± 12.95		13.09 ± 6.19	
$M_{interview\ length}$ (in min)	80.0		73.00	

[a] International coaches: Eight at the World Cup level, of which five coached Paralympic/Olympic-level athletes.   [b] International athletes: Six competed in international competitions (e.g., Nation Cups and Commonwealth Games), of which three participated at the World Cup level.

collection ended after the variation within interviews became limited in that no new themes emerged from the data; however, the aim was to keep equal numbers of coaches and athletes.

Data Analysis

Interviews lasted between 45 and 135 min and added up to 888 pages of double-spaced text after transcription, using the f4transkript software (Dr. Dresing & Pehl GmbH; version f4, 2015); approximately 25% of the entire data have been used for this study. A *directed content analysis* (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) approach was used to gain an understanding of the data. According to Hsieh and Shannon, this specific approach to data analyses aims to "extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (p. 1281) and as such complies with the use of Wachsmuth et al.'s review article as a general guide for the current study. In line with pragmatism as the underlying philosophical viewpoint, the directed approach to content analyses as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) permits a deductive−inductive (i.e., abductive) approach to data analyses by acknowledging that the previous research offers guidance to the analysis, whereas new themes may enrich and extend existing theories or concepts. Both Wachsmuth et al.'s (2017) proposed conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships and the interview schedule offered direction for the initial categorization of the data into the main categories of conflict *prevention*, *management*, and *outcomes*, whereas subcategories (e.g., *implicit conflict prevention* and *conflict management barriers*) were added inductively from the data.

According to recommendations by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), Svenja Wachsmuth initially immersed fully in the collected data by relistening to the audio files, as well as reading, annotating, and highlighting the transcripts. Second, the highlighted quotes and excerpts were organized deductively into the main three categories of conflict prevention, management, and outcomes. Subsequently, data analyses within these main categories were conducted inductively, dividing the data further into subcategories and themes (e.g., implicit and explicit conflict prevention and conflict barriers; please refer to online supplemental material/Appendix for specific examples). These steps of data analysis were initially carried out individually for each participant, and thereafter, a cross-case analysis was conducted for coaches and athletes separately, before finally comparing the subsamples. This comparison was facilitated by visually displaying the identified subcategories and themes across coaches and athletes. Mapping the data enabled the lead researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the collected information by drawing associations between the individual themes and the existing literature (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). However, Hsieh and Shannon warned that a directed approach to content analysis might make researchers prone to an overidentification of theory-supportive compared with nonsupportive themes and blind for contextual influences. Being aware of this limitation, the lead author made every effort to approach data with an open mind-set necessary to identify nontheory conforming themes within the participants' reports, which resulted in the reconsideration of the original aspects of the framework that guided this study (e.g., management strategies and management barriers).

Multiple measures were taken to ensure quality and rigor of the conducted research. Thus, the current research project was empirically embedded within an existing line of inquiry into the nature of coach−athlete interactions. In this area, the study of conflict seems of particularly high practical relevance considering its prevalence (Mellalieu et al., 2013) as well as its potential detrimental consequences for performance and well-being (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). Criterion-based, purposeful sampling further enabled the lead researcher to gain rich and insightful data as presented in the quotes of this article. Further, critical thinking and reflection of Svenja Wachsmuth were facilitated by the coauthors who acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2017) and as such continuously challenged interpretations and offered different perspectives on the data throughout data analyses. The credibility of the current findings was further promoted by revisiting reflective notes and interview transcripts to examine whether the created categories indeed reflected participants' accounts on coach–athlete conflict management. Final refinements of subcategories (e.g., definitions and titles of conflict prevention subcategories) were made based on the reviews of interview transcripts and ongoing

critical discussion with coauthors in their role as critical friends.

Results

Data were classified in the main categories of *conflict prevention*, *management*, and *outcomes* and further divided into subcategories and subthemes (*italic*) as described later. Throughout this section, the term "participants" is only used when both coaches and athletes referred to the respective theme.

Conflict Prevention

The main category of *conflict prevention* (Table A1) incorporated two subcategories reflecting two distinct approaches to reduce the likelihood of coach–athlete conflict: *implicit conflict prevention* and *explicit conflict prevention*.

Implicit conflict prevention. This category comprises strategies that aim to naturally *enhance relationship quality* and facilitate an *optimal performance environment* without deliberately targeting a reduction of conflict. Most participants stated that a high-quality CAR formed a solid foundation for a lasting and successful working partnership. Essential to such sound relationships is communication. Accordingly, coaches and athletes emphasized the need for open lines of communication to prevent conflict and ensure a good interpersonal climate. Being approachable as a coach and sharing information early on were deemed vital in this process:

> Making the athlete aware of the fact that it is okay to go and talk to your coach [. . .] rather than people perhaps feeling a little bit sometimes like they couldn't approach their coach or something. (A10)

Although athletes expected their coaches to be democratic, the reality often seemed different in that athletes repeatedly expressed to not being able to speak openly to their coaches, leading to conflict sooner or later. Hence, Athlete 7 suggested that "at the end of the day you can avoid a lot of arguments by just asking someone before instead of setting a plan and saying 'you're doing this'." In addition, participants expected coaches to be adaptable to the individual needs of athletes without losing sight of the bigger picture:

> You cannot treat people the way you wanna be treated, you have to treat people the way they want to be treated, so it really is about having a fundamental understanding of how athletes receive you and how athletes like to communicate. So that if you can pick up on their cues or if you have an understanding how somebody operates, ultimately you do not stop communicating you just change how you communicate and sometimes it's how you need to change this that makes all the difference. (C10)

However, adaptability was not a characteristic of the coaches only; athletes too are expected to be adaptable by working well with different coaches. Strongly acknowledging the notion of adaptability and flexibility, coaches, in particular, emphasized that athletes were expected to be reliable and show constant effort and strong work ethic, which were evaluated against mutually accepted performance goals. Besides engaging in frequent conversation, shared decision-making, and caring for athletes' needs, coaches highlighted the importance of "giving credits" (C4) to these athletes who were willing to discuss disagreements openly, as it facilitated quality relationships, better interactions, and honest communication. This was also perceived to create an atmosphere in which athletes were prepared to accept the coach as a leader and the decisions the coach made. This mutual understanding seemed important in the interaction with external stakeholders, including media. Athlete 1 underlined that "normally a coach and [athlete] are singing of the same hymn sheet and they've got the same ideas and approach" (A1). Finally, participants emphasized the value of an *optimal performance environment* or culture in which individuals respected one another, and although the collective formed a close-knit group bound together by strong ties and common goals, new members were always welcomed:

> If anybody new comes into the environment it's a handshake culture. So, if he met me and somebody walks in that's new, instead of making him feel awkward, we stop the meeting and shake hands, everybody gets up and says "Hello," that's pretty special about the culture in this particular place. (C5)

Explicit conflict prevention. In contrast to the previously described strategies that prevented conflict in a more natural and unplanned manner, coaches and athletes also explained how they used specific strategies to deliberately prevent conflict in a proactive and strategical way. On an individual level, participants com-

monly reported the importance of being in control over their emotions and actions (*self-regulation*), for example, by being diplomatic rather than forceful or direct (e.g., coaches), trying to calm down or take some time off before speaking up, and also being patient instead of demanding or even expecting immediate change (e.g., coaches and athletes). These self-regulatory strategies were also linked to taking perspective and responding empathically (*empathy*). Just as self-regulation, coaches and athletes deemed it important to consider the reasons of the other person for reacting or behaving in the way they did. Thus, participants tended to acknowledge the positive intentions behind somebody's actions or considering the potential impact conflict may have in the long run:

> I do control myself to not have conflict. 'Cause I feel like during a session if I were to have conflict, it would be bad. I would look bad. I do not want [the coach] to feel bad. [. . .] And it's just going to deteriorate the session. (A4)

Despite understanding that conflict can be resolved, managed, or reduced by all participants, athletes particularly often reported being compliant to their coaches due to a perceived power differential within the relationship:

> Even if I disagree with it. Quite often, he'll say something, I'll disagree with it entirely. A hundred percent. I'll hundred percent disagree with it. But I'll still do it. Because he's the boss and that's the way it has to be. (A4)

Only on rare occasions did athletes note how they would seek clarification about perceived differences or actively articulate, discuss, and negotiate their point of view to find a solution or compromise before differences in opinions turned into conflict. In that respect, athletes stated that they would openly communicate potential conflict topics to their coaches well in advance to prevent conflict later on. By anticipating conflict before it arose, they were ready to manage rather than having to react to it when it presented. Similarly, coaches due to their inherent position of power and assumed responsibility as a role model were viewed instrumental in setting up rules, clarifying expectations, and identifying goals that helped to minimize or prevent conflict (*communicating expectations and potential problems*); Coach 7 reported that "hopefully both having a clear picture and clear

expectations of what is expected, that in the first place, I would like to think would reduce the amount of conflict."

In addition, the *timing of prevention strategies* was deemed important by participants. Although disagreements ideally should be discussed well in advance without "letting them fester" (A6), sometimes athletes initially acted against their own but rather put up with their coaches' opinions to avoid conflict in critical situations (e.g., in public or competition) and only addressed the issue at a later point of time when it seemed more appropriate (e.g., after practice/competition or in a one-on-one meeting). For example, athletes explained that coaches may benefit from feedback related to intrateam issues and coach−player processes, but it would be more appropriate and effective if it was supplied privately, "quietly in meetings" with the aim to "come up with a solution" (A4).

Overall, participants perceived coaches' *instruction and feedback style* as crucial. Examples provided included finding a balance between criticism and encouragement, accepting challenges and questions from athletes, or giving positive feedback in a meaningful manner. Coach 5 explained a structured process to negative feedback that aimed to reduce conflict:

> Quick introduction: "Hi, you're right? Look, got bad news to tell you, if you give me 30 s I would love to hear your response." You just give them the news: "You're dropped" or "You're not involved this weekend" and then you give them a clear objective reason for that, or your reason [. . .] then give really clear, kinda XYZ and then that's it. But if you do that with an athlete in a 45-s period, really clear concise and you do not actually ask them how they are feeling, you kinda turn the process to how to get back in. "Are you happy with that?," rather than "I know you're not happy with the decision."

Coaches also acknowledged that the *team composition* needs to be considered as a whole in the prevention of conflict. Accordingly, few coaches recalled adjusting their team selection in a manner that would reduce possible conflict within the team, including staff members. Coach 4, for example, emphasized that they contemplated how athletes would fit into the specific team environment and how contracting certain players might change these dynamics. Thus, despite being able to sign "exceptional players," the number of foreign and national squad players was reduced to avoid conflict by permitting frequent face-to-face communica-

tion, connectedness, and influence. Another coach described how international athletes received support from staff members to integrate well into the club. Moreover, athletes mentioned how they used *athlete leaders* to transfer messages and feedback to the coach; Athlete 6 describes "they did pass stuff through me to the coach," whereas coaches liaised closely with these players to gain understanding of intrateam processes and manage internal problems.

However, participants acknowledged that conflict was inevitable and some did not even try to intentionally prevent it. They recognized that the creation of an environment—one in which they were not afraid of dealing with conflict or interpersonal difficulties but instead embraced them as an acceptable situation that needed to be dealt with—would encourage athletes and coaches to readily and actively seek solutions that prevented conflict escalation:

> There is naturally gonna be conflict, I think it's understanding that and maybe understanding how to deal with it [. . .] there needs to be a way of dealing with it, I think that comes from understanding people's personalities, how different people gonna respond [. . .] there should almost be in advance kind of a plan for each player of how things gonna get resolved. (A6)

Conflict Management

The main category of *conflict management* included five subcategories: (a) *role responsibilities*, (b) *intrapersonal strategies*, (c) *interpersonal strategies*, (d) *external support*, and (e) *conflict management barriers* (Table A2).

Role responsibilities. This first higher order theme covers processes and expectations related to an instigation of the conflict management process. The majority of participants agreed that conflict management was often initiated by coaches who approached athletes to clarify the situation, whereas athletes rarely opened up conversations involving issues of conflict such as difference in opinion or even clarifying a coaching decision or request. However, coaches acknowledged that athletes in the presence of conflict tended to show reconciliatory behaviors, such as putting more effort into practice, suggestive of willingness to resolve the conflict. It was evident from the reports that athletes expected their coaches to take charge from the start and guide them through conflict to its resolution. This was confirmed by all coaches too who perceived themselves to be the

more experienced, wiser, the rational role model, and *conflict solver*: "If the coach wants to get results he has to be the one, he has to be the mediator and the person that is gonna try and solve those things" (C9). Accordingly, coaches considered it their duty to create an awareness for conflict and offer an opportunity for athletes to vent emotions without becoming overly involved. Finally, it was emphasized that dealing with conflict consistently was paramount.

Whereas coaches were perceived to be the leaders for problem-solving, athletes were perceived to be the *leaders of performance*. As pointed out by Athlete 8, "Athletes need to take responsibility for anything that impacts on their performance." Athletes were responsible for any issue—however controversial—that affected their performance. This was especially important to realize, as it was repeatedly pointed out by both, athletes and coaches, that coaches did not always know about ongoing problems or the severity of an ongoing conflict. They did not know because athletes never shared these problems with them. Accordingly, coaches expected their athletes to be willing to communicate problems that were associated with performance. Further, coaches discussed the importance of athletes being self-reflective as well as open, receptive, and responsive to their coaches' point of view to come to a mutual and acceptable solution in the face of problems and adversities. At the end, all interviewees agreed that conflict management needs to be a give and take from both sides if it is to be effective.

Intrapersonal strategies. Interviewees reported how they engaged in individual strategies to deal with the conflict at hand. Accordingly, coaches and athletes explained how they noticed a need to downregulate emotions before engaging with the conflict partner. Especially, coaches perceived themselves as more mature and experienced and, therefore, expected to stay calm and collected as well as to be empathetic toward the athlete, as described by Coach 4, who said, "The only thing I thought is if he is emotional that's fine but I can't be, I need to be empathetic." In contrast, some athletes reported to vent anger or frustration by smacking or kicking equipment instead of targeting their coach, which may lead to the escalation of conflict. Some athletes also reported to become

quiet and reserved or withdraw from the situation as an initial reaction to conflict, using the gained time to regulate emotions and reassess and reappraise or even reconstruct the situation (*self-regulation; reflection* and *preparation*). Coaches and athletes further engaged in these self-reflection processes, as it helped to make sense of what had happened, rationalize, and prioritize aspects of the conflict. Both sides also emphasized the need to prepare for conflict management:

> I think it is important to prepare what you want to say to the player and what your reasons are, whether it's notes or make sure that you have it clear in your head that you're not fumbling around, you have your rational ready. (C1)

This included rather simplistic things such as athletes bringing notebooks and listing potential questions or concerns, but also coaches gathering information about the other's situation or background, as well as monitoring and documenting athletes' behaviors during an ongoing conflict. It was even suggested by coaches that reading up on related topics (e.g., anxiety and developmental psychology) can provide the reassurance, confidence, and necessary knowledge to approach often awkward and uncomfortable conflict situations. In contrast to these rather positive and helpful actions, athletes also described how they avoided engaging in conflict by doing "their own thing" when no open communication with coaches seemed possible or forthcoming. Athlete 2 reported, "I either just do a bit of it [training] or do what he gives me but just do my interpretation," whereas another athlete organized their competition schedule alone (*avoidance*). However, this was viewed as extreme behavior and indicative of a communication breakdown likely to be followed by the dissolution of the coach–athlete dyad.

Interpersonal strategies. Despite the need for intrapersonal strategies, conflict management is an exchange between two conflict partners and thus cannot be achieved by only one individual. Coaches and athletes mentioned multiple strategies that aimed to resolve conflict in a mutual way. First, the majority of coaches supported athletes' self-regulation by offering space and time, or even acted as a sounding board so that athletes were able to vent frustration (*coregulation*). Coaches were comfortable with pauses or silent moments in communica-

tion, as they were means to reflect: "You let the players chew on it for a bit" (C6).

Further, coaches and athletes *acknowledged responsibilities* and apologized for mistakes, either verbally or by showing corresponding behaviors; for example, Coach 6 reported how they "got send this huge bouquet of flowers from two 20-year-old girls." Coaches generally made concessions to athletes when these tried to seek out opportunities to *collaborate or compromise*. This was especially the case in trivial or competition- and/or training-related conflicts, as illustrated by Athlete 5, who said the following:

> We talked about [. . .] the scores that I need to get to qualify. He was like if you make that we are going to world student games, when I heard that I was like okay, so he is going to make an effort.

In contrast, most coaches approached conflicts evolving around behavioral misconduct (e.g., lacking respect) or repeated disagreements in a forceful manner; hence, they did not offer choice or negotiation but were definitive and irrevocable (*forcing*). These direct, commanding, and often controlling behaviors were also used in front of other team members if coaches felt these were necessary; for example, in times when "people need knocking down a pack or two" (C6), the team needed to know that the coach had dealt with a particular issue or the conflict reflected an issue that concerned multiple athletes within the training environment. Whereas some athletes *obliged* to these decisions due to coaches' perceived authority, other athletes viewed these behaviors as inappropriate, especially if their private life or career was in question. Sometimes, when coaches and athletes had or wanted to work together despite unresolved dispute, they ended up "agreeing to disagree" (C4) and tried to live with or move past the conflict.

Perceived as essential to all interpersonal conflict management approaches was *communication*. Although it was generally of interest how coaches and athletes communicated with each other to achieve their personal aims and a resolution of conflict, participants especially emphasized coaches' communication style toward the athletes. One key element repeatedly highlighted by coaches was related to communicating interest and care. Accordingly, coaches encouraged and welcomed their athletes to ex-

press concerns or opinions and actively asked questions to gain further information or feedback. Athletes reported how coaches actively listened and acknowledged their opinions, which facilitated an openness to talk; Athlete 6 described, "It was more of a conversation than [the coach] talking at me or telling me what I should do." Overall, participants expected their conflict partners to be willing to share opinions, needs, and expectations, as well as being able to give reasons for their behaviors and decisions. Coaches used these conversations as an opportunity to increase awareness or educate athletes on the implications of their behaviors; they further helped them reflect on and understand their behavioral motives for the conflict:

> We try to encourage the athlete to look at areas that they felt there was a difference in the preparation or a difference in the mind-set going into the championship that they hadn't had in place before, just so that they were trying to be self-assessed as opposed to being dictated to again. (C10)

Besides promoting self-reflection, coaches encouraged athletes to see conflict from diverse perspectives and as such gain distance to it. Coach 6 asked, for example, "What do you think about this situation? How do you think that would make someone feel? How do you think that would make me feel?" Accordingly, coaches challenged their athletes by asking questions, pointing out behaviors, or criticizing their work ethic to stimulate motivation and challenge athletes' core beliefs. Although coaches and athletes reported that they usually tried to understand the other, they acknowledged that it was not always easy.

On the basis of these conflict management conversations, athletes and coaches reassessed and set new goals and expectations to move on. Coaches described how they aimed at leaving conflict management meetings on a positive remark and emphasized their willingness to move forward together. Overall, coaches and athletes emphasized that all communication should take place in a calm and controlled manner, in which opinions and needs could be stated openly, honestly, and courteously; Coach 9 explained, "I would never be strong again [. . .] it's much more calmer and nearly all of the time it would be a very positive meeting." At times, coaches and athletes had to rely on indirect communication strategies, such as e-mails or phone, which they regarded as more difficult compared with face-to-face meetings.

External support. To facilitate intra- and interpersonal strategies, participants reported how they sought out help from third parties who were not involved in the conflict. Thus, athletes mainly used their *friends and family* to "vent your frustration and then look for advice perhaps afterwards" (A10). In team settings, athletes reported further how individuals turned to *team members*, which was sometimes perceived as counterproductive, as alliances against the coach were likely to form. However, athletes described how it was difficult to find somebody neutral to mediate conflict, as they believed that staff members were biased toward the coach. Accordingly, it was suggested that a sport psychologist may equip athletes with knowledge and skills to deal with conflict as well as to mediate meetings.

Coaches, on the other hand, explained how they sought out information from their *staff members* and sometimes other athletes. They deemed it important to gain comprehensive insights into the problem and aimed at understanding the athlete before making premature assumptions; thus, coaches took as much time as necessary and exhausted as many resources as possible, as Coach 10 said, "It's about collecting as much information as you can and gathering all the facts that you can know." Faced with severe conflict, coaches reported working with their performance director who they perceived to be especially experienced and knowledgeable to try to find ways to resolve problems, issues, or concerns. Finally, few coaches attended *mentoring programs* or used other professional development services to improve their conflict management skills.

Conflict management barriers. Finally, it was acknowledged that there were several factors that may impair conflict management or resolution. Accordingly, when *relationship quality* was poor or had deteriorated over time to a point where no open communication or rational conversation could take place, conflict reached a point where a solution seemed almost impossible. In addition, coaches sometimes lacked *awareness* that there was conflict, how serious it was, and/or what it involved—and even if they were aware, neither coaches nor

athletes were always receptive to the other's opinion or willing to take their perspective:

> To resolve conflict both parties need to recognize (a) there is conflict and (b) they both want to resolve it. [. . .] in a conflict situation where only one party wants to resolve you have to move on, [. . .] you can only control what you can do and if you've done everything you can and there still seems to be no way to resolve the conflict then, you know, you cannot just keep beating your head against the wall. Once you've done all your communication, you've asked all the questions, you tried to get as deep as you can, if one of those two parties is still convinced that there is no way to resolve . . . (C10)

Coach 10 mentions two more essential factors that can get in the way of conflict management: time and energy restrictions. Coaches often emphasized that situational circumstances or the amount of responsibilities simply required them to prioritize and sometimes did not allow for the efforts needed to resolve conflict. Similarly, coaches needed to consider the bigger picture by prioritizing team goals over individuals (*willingness and priorities*). Finally, coaches and athletes explained that the behavior of the other conflict partner was not entirely in their control, especially if there was a *discrepancy between what has been agreed on and how it was followed up*. Athlete 2 said, "Saying the right things but then not acting on them" would often get in the way of conflict resolution.

Conflict Outcomes

Depending on the conflict management barriers faced and strategies used, conflict could lead to positive, neutral, and negative outcomes, as well as short- and long-term outcomes. Within the main category of conflict outcomes, three subcategories were identified: *intrapersonal*, *performance*, and *interpersonal outcomes* (Table A3).

Intrapersonal outcomes. On an individual basis, immediate and long-term effects were, for example, related to *well-being*, with participants overall reporting heightened stress levels and rumination when conflict was not resolved constructively (e.g., conflict avoidance). In particular, athletes explained how they experienced sleep issues, anxiety, or low/depressive mood. Even injuries seemed to be a result of conflict when no agreement about the training load was reached and athletes adhered to the program.

Athlete 2 stated that "I used to just go and do it [training program]. But I just kept getting injured just because I cannot do it, I just cannot do all that stuff." Related to well-being were also athletes' efficacy beliefs; whereas coaches did not report a decrease in self-confidence, athletes mentioned frequent doubts regarding sport-specific skills, but also their athletic and personal identity, especially when coaches engaged in overly competitive conflict management strategies. In line with that, Athlete 6 shared, "I felt like he was kind of breaking down my personality [. . .] I felt really insecure, it was really strange, I felt really lost, I didn't know who I was anymore."

Contrarily, coaches emphasized the positive impact on one's *sport development* that conflict may have, not only in regard to athletes' skills but also for the development of one's coaching style and efficacy; Coach 10 summarized, "It's about developing and growing as a coach as much as an athlete." Thus, conflict was thought to foster resilience and teach athletes to embrace challenge. Outside sports, it was perceived to enhance athletes' *personal growth*, including becoming more self-aware, developing communication skills and critical thinking, being able to take perspective, and become more open-minded. One athlete mentioned how they were able to disclose personal information to the coach and felt finally understood. These learning processes of athletes, however, required skilled conflict management from the coach.

Performance outcomes. *Positive performance* outcomes were mainly associated with finding an effective solution for the original problem that both parties could agree upon. Resolved conflicts seemed to improve athletes' commitment and work ethic in the long run, sometimes forming a stepping stone for future performances; Coach 7 said the following:

> [The athlete] won a bronze medal at the world champs this year, the senior championships [. . .] [the athlete] came back to work with me again and from then on [the athlete's] commitment, progress has been like this [up] and [the athlete] told me that this was the best thing [conflict] I could ever have done.

Few coaches also described how ongoing conflict directly led to sporting success:

> The end effect was that when he came to the competition he did the best competition he has ever done, he won the medal, he won all the individual apparatus medals and had the dream competition of his life. (C9)

These effects were attributed to a desire to prove the coach wrong or a generally improved motivation/work ethic. Accordingly, athletes seemed to be able to channel negative emotions into their sport performance in the short run but also learned from conflict in the long run.

However, some participants described how they tried to separate between the conflict with their coach/athlete and the task to avoid negative effects and perform consistently. Nevertheless, not all *negative outcomes* of conflict could be avoided, so athletes discussed how they worried about unresolved conflicts or felt distracted or physically and mentally exhausted, which resulted in decreased results or performance stagnation. In addition, few athletes and coaches reported a lack of motivation immediately during or after the conflict. Moreover, coaching efficacy may deteriorate as a consequence of conflict, both short and long terms, as athletes lose focus on the sport or even respect for and trust in the coach. Finally, severe conflict promoted athletes' thoughts about career termination if it was perceived to a long-term impact on well-being, or no satisfying agreement was found:

> It might mean that you give up playing [sport] cause you cannot – with all of the stuff [conflict] that takes away from the actual playing, so I guess it can challenge you to think of other things. (A6)

Interpersonal outcomes. Continuing this line of thought, even if athletes did not decide to terminate their sport career, they sometimes still parted ways with their coaches because of the conflicts experienced (*termination*). Further, more athletes than coaches described their relationships after difficult conflicts as strained, tense, and lacking respect, trust, confidence, and openness, which were hard to build up again. However, taking a long-term perspective, some conflicts did not negatively impact *relationship quality* if both sides were able to move on. Indeed, most athletes and coaches perceived that conflict enhanced their relationships over time. They explained that conflict parties gained a better understanding of the other person because,

> in the heat of the moment, they say things that maybe give you a clue, gives you a clue to something that is sitting deep there but they are not prepared to talk about it, but in the heat of the moment they do,

which then can be "picked up on when things are quietened down" (C9). Overall, participants highlighted the advantages of functional conflict. Coach 4 concluded, "The beauty about conflict is that it can actually make stronger relationships [. . .] actually a lot of my best relationships have come out of some conflict at some point." Further, coach–athlete conflict may also be contagious and impact *other relationships*. If managed well, it may promote respect and trust in a coach and even increase team cohesion. Coach 8 experienced conflict at the beginning of an international tournament and said, "It actually helped because I think the players respected me more after that. They thought 'Right, we've got to pull together here' and it was forgotten." On the other hand, conflict may lead to alliances between athletes against the coach or to criticism from staff or other coaches. Taken together, it seems that conflict "makes or breaks a relationship" (A6).

Discussion

Using the framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships (Wachsmuth et al., 2017) as a scaffold, the current research focused on exploring practical strategies used by coaches and athletes to prevent and manage conflict as well as assessing their effectiveness in relation to perceived conflict outcomes. Specifically, the following research questions were explored: (a) *What* practical strategies do coaches and athletes use to prevent and manage interpersonal conflict and *how* do they implement these? (b) What conflict outcomes do coaches and athletes experience as a result of successful/unsuccessful conflict management? Participants' reports revealed that coaches and athletes aimed to prevent conflict through implicit and explicit strategies and further managed conflict after its onset by using intra- and interpersonal strategies, as well as by seeking external support. In their attempts to manage conflict, participants experienced a range of barriers that influenced immediate and long-term conflict outcomes. In accordance with the study's analytical approach of directed content analyses, which is generally used to "extend" existing theories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281), the current findings support Wachsmuth et al.'s framework and further expand it. Within this discussion, we aim to integrate the current findings into the existing research to make sense of them in a holistic manner.

The generated findings highlight that conflict may represent a functional as well as a dysfunctional process within the CAR. Accordingly, participants described conflict as an unpleasant process that should be prevented, as it may lead to detrimental outcomes. On the other hand, participants reported that conflict may facilitate interpersonal relationships, personal development, and performance if managed appropriately. Nonetheless, it was evident that participants departed from the simplistic differentiation of constructive/ unconstructive conflict management by offering a more differentiated view covering various intra- and interpersonal strategies as well as third-party involvement. They explained that some strategies seemed to be constructive in some situations, whereas others were appropriate under different circumstances, and as such highlighted the importance of further investigating environmental factors that influence coach–athlete conflict.

Interpersonal Conflict as a Dysfunctional Process

Although the results of this study are in line with the relevant literature (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) and highlight the value of high-quality CARs for sport development, performance, satisfaction, as well as well-being, they also illustrate the importance of preventing potential negative consequences (e.g., performance stagnation or ill-being) when coach−athlete interactions become dysfunctional (e.g., misunderstandings, disagreements, or conflict). Whereas Dixon and Warner (2010) argued that strong coach–athlete bonds may be a "desirable feature" (p. 159) for coaches within *lower level* American college sports (NCAA Division III), the findings of the current study explicate that these strong bonds are absolutely vital and require protection within *high-performance environments*.

The results of this study highlighted several approaches to protect these strong bonds by ensuring continuous lines of open communication that promote the formation of a common ground of shared information and expectations. In accordance with the notions of transformational leadership (Hoption, Phelan, & Barling, 2007) and autonomy supportive coaching (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009), coaches were further expected to facilitate athletes' motivation and performance by considering individuals' needs and encouraging

athletes to think critically while creating an environment in which athletes bought into coaches' visions. It was evident through the participants' reports that the strategies used created an optimal training environment in which dysfunctional conflict was less likely to occur. However, coaches and athletes highlighted how *implicit conflict prevention* through strong working alliances was not sufficient, but instead needed to be purposefully supported by strategies that prevented coach–athlete conflict (*explicit conflict prevention*). For example, coaches attempted to reduce conflict potential by carefully considering both the selection of team members and the leaders within the team based on interpersonal aspects (e.g., intrateam relationships, personality, and values). Similar to Jowett and Carpenter (2015), participants further outlined the importance of setting clear expectations and rules. In addition, the current study further details the manner in which expectations and rules were set and implemented through the identification of common goals, negotiation of acceptable terms, continuous evaluation and revision, coaches' role modeling, as well as athletes' timely communication of potential concerns or their unconditional compliance to coaches' decisions.

Whereas athlete compliance as an explicit form of conflict prevention was often caused by controlling coaching behaviors and promoted destructive coach–athlete interactions in the long run (cf. Bartholomew et al., 2009; Felton & Jowett, 2013), coaches' use of forceful strategies was deemed appropriate in some conflict situations. For example, forceful/dominant conflict management strategies were considered constructive when quick decisions needed to be made (e.g., during competition), several individuals were involved (e.g., multiple athletes), or athletes were perceived to lack respect for the coach or commitment to the sport. In contrast to previous research in which the coach was usually portrayed as the one holding power over the athlete (Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015; Potrac et al., 2002), some athletes in this study overcame these hierarchical norms and reported using dominant/forceful approaches to coach conflict when their personal health (e.g., injury) or private life choices (e.g., education) were concerned. Nonetheless, even though these strategies could be positive and effective in the short term, if they were to be applied over time, they

could lead to ongoing or frequently reoccurring interpersonal conflict. Under these circumstances, not only would conflicts be perceived as dysfunctional by athletes and coaches, but they would also lead to negative performance and intra- and interpersonal outcomes, such as decreased motivation and focus, low mood, increased stress and anxiety levels, higher injury rates, and relationship termination. Additional, athletes also indicated low levels of self-esteem and undermined identity beliefs as a result of interpersonal conflict. These findings are in line with Tamminen et al.'s (2013) reports, whereby athletes identified dysfunctional coach–athlete interactions as a cause of self-doubt, identity loss, and even suicidal thoughts. Research is warranted in the area of chronic conflict and its potential influence on well-being and performance. The current results suggest that self-regulation and external support may provide some initial resources to cope with conflict-induced stress; however, more research is required to substantiate this finding.

Conflict Management Barriers

Although the current study did not specifically aim to investigate conflict management barriers, multiple factors that inhibited constructive intra- and interpersonal strategies to deal with coach–athlete dispute became apparent and included personal unawareness, unwillingness, or missing mutually acceptable solutions. Often these barriers were the result of insufficient communication between the dyad members. It was evident from the participants' reports that social norms and cultural expectations (Potrac & Jones, 2009), such as role definitions within a traditionally hierarchical system in which coaches "lead" and athletes "follow," shaped a performance environment within which power differentials as well as lack of trust and openness existed.

In line with these cultural norms, some athletes perceived their coaches to possess high levels of legitimate (formal hierarchy) and coercive power (capacity to punish) that they were not prepared to challenge, and therefore obliged them to follow their coaches' decisions even though they disagreed. These negative aspects of power seem to be consistent with previous findings related to abusive behaviors or poor coaching practices within high-performance

sport environments (D'Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998; Gearity & Metzger, 2017; Gearity & Murray, 2011). Although athletes perceived these behaviors as inappropriate, ineffective, and negative, coaches viewed them as "the right way of coaching" and a way of gaining respect (Potrac & Jones, 2009). This notion is supported by previous work on coaching effectiveness and emotional abuse that nonetheless illustrates athletes' acceptance of these behaviors in an effort to be seen as "a good athlete" (D'Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Having said this, our research shows that some athletes did not tolerate such a coaching style and openly challenged these behaviors or even terminated the relationship with their coaches. Yet, Stirling and Kerr (2009) explained that athletes' choices in regard to training venues and/or personal coaches may be limited in performance sport; therefore, resistance to coaches' behaviors can potentially determine their future sporting career.

Athletes' resistance is more likely to emerge when coaches' behaviors are negative or inappropriate, and thus, when coaches' behavior is more positive, athletes may be more willing to cooperate. Thus, behaviors linked to coaches' capacity to positively influence athletes by displaying competence and expertise (i.e., prosocial power; French & Raven, 1959) can promote athletes' followership and compliance, and as such may reduce conflict (Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015). Participants in the current study reported behaviors such as forming common rules by openly discussing expectations and roles (cf. Jowett & Carpenter, 2015), as well as by showing competence through expert feedback, thorough preparation, and role modeling. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that coaches within high-performance environments also experience a multitude of organizational demands (Olusoga, Butt, Hays, & Maynard, 2009) and ultimately need to manage a range of relationships to satisfy expectations of sport organizations. Hence, limited time and resources may sway coaches' priorities toward matters perceived to be more urgent and away from individual conflict situations, as mentioned within this study. In sum, environmental and cultural factors are likely to influence conflict management within CARs. Accordingly, future research should investigate social networks, environmental circumstances, and cultural aspects

systematically to offer a holistic understanding of conflict processes. As such conflict research may offer an opportunity to unravel the complex, chaotic, and "ambiguous social environments" of coaching (North, 2013, p. 288) while it considers an interdisciplinary approach, including, for example, psychology, sociology, and pedagogy. Such an approach could generate knowledge and understanding that is applied, comprehensive, and multifaceted and may be used by sport practitioners (e.g., athletes, coach-related staff, and sport psychologists) to create challenging but healthy sporting environments in which interpersonal conflict can be managed successfully.

Interpersonal Conflict as a Constructive Process

In contrast to the aforementioned results that portray conflict as a disruptive and dysfunctional process, participants of the current study also considered conflict as a valuable and constructive process. They reported seeking out opportunities following conflict to collaborate and develop short- or long-term agreements that promoted performance, personal growth, and interpersonal relationships. Taking into account the previously described power differentials and cultural norms, coaches (as knowledgeable and experienced leaders) were thought to be best placed to prevent and manage conflict constructively. As such, coaches were expected to take the first step toward resolution and were held responsible for guiding athletes through conflict by being in control of their own emotions, co-regulating athletes' emotions, as well as responding empathically in a given situation (cf. Lopes et al., 2011). This included being able to judge whether it was more appropriate to approach the athlete in a caring manner or whether an opportunity presented to challenge athletes' core values and beliefs. This finding aligns with the broader conflict literature that has shown that opposing and collaborating communication strategies enhance long-term satisfaction depending on contextual characteristics, such as attachment style, likelihood of evoking change, and the importance of the conflict topic (Overall & McNulty, 2017). Future research should aim to explore conflict and the specific communication strategies used during the life course of the CAR.

In addition, participants in the current study viewed conflict as an opportunity for life skill learning and personal development, which has often been emphasized as an essential element of sport (Gould, & Carson, 2008; Jones, & Lavallee, 2009). Accordingly, coaches and athletes identified potential for personal growth through self-awareness, empathy, as well as adversity and resilience, and skill development through communication and self-regulation as a long-term response to conflict. Further, it was evident that an increased flow of information also enhanced task clarity and problem-solving, and as such aided performance directly. The findings of this study mirror previous research (Holt et al., 2012) that reported beneficial aspects of conflict within sport teams. However, whereas successful conflict management seemed to be essential for the positive development of the individual and the relationship (cf. Cramer, 2002), the impact of conflict on performance may be more complex to capture and understand. It is noteworthy that, on the one hand, negative emotions and increased arousal during conflict seemed to be linked to increased motivation and stimulated performance for some athletes, but, on the other hand, conflict was perceived to be distractive and exhausting by others. As previously suggested, it will be of interest to explore the associations between conflict and positive versus negative (performance) outcomes by studying the context within which conflict evolves, including situational circumstances (e.g., training/competition), individual characteristics (e.g., personality, age, and gender), and environmental factors (e.g., sport culture/system). In addition, factors worth investigating also include sources of support (e.g., sport psychology and social network) coaches and athletes can rely on in their efforts to manage conflict as indicated by current participants.

In conclusion, while it is coaches' experience and position within the dyad that make them key problem solvers during difficult times, it is both coaches' and athletes' willingness to engage in constructive conflict management and their ability to communicate effectively that can have important ramifications in minimizing negative conflict and facilitating positive conflict. Yet, it seems a challenge for athletes to find a way to open up, start a dialogue, and address issues with their coaches that really concern them. The results of this investigation

into coaches' and athletes' experiences of conflict management and its consequences may resonate with a wide range of sport participants regardless of their age, gender, sport level, or type. These results may, in fact, support sport participants to use some of the proposed strategies to constructively approach conflict when it occurs. Although the current findings come from coaches and athletes who are involved in high-performance sport, the presented challenges and strategies may well be transferable to coaches and athletes who operate in participation (recreation) sport. Moreover, although conflict is viewed within the CAR, it is possible that similar processes occur in other types of relationships within the sport domain (e.g., athlete−athlete, athlete−partner, or parent−athlete) and outside it (e.g., business and romantic or marital relationships; Rahim, 2002; Overall & McNulty, 2017). This potential overlap in the findings may suggest their theoretical generalizability reaching beyond the specific domain within which this study was conducted (cf. Smith, 2018). Nevertheless, future research may help to expand the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively manage coach−athlete conflict and thus help further improve sport participants' interpersonal interaction. Based on the generated information, training programs that facilitate conflict prevention and management among sport participants may be developed and examined. Training programs within the applied field of sport psychology can supply valuable knowledge and practical skills that coaches and athletes can readily use to effectively address any interpersonal concerns. Socially skillful athletes and coaches can, in turn, actively contribute to the development and maintenance of functional and healthy relationships in which performance can flourish and individuals grow.

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(*Appendix follow*)

Appendix

Themes, Sub-Themes, and Examples

Table A1
Conflict Prevention Strategies

Subcategory	Theme	Strategies suggested for coaches and athletes
Implicit conflict prevention	Enhance relationship quality	Coaches: *be approachable and democratic, give credit to people who address concerns* Athletes: *be reliable, work hard, share needs* Both: *open and honest communication, adapt to individuals' preferences*
	Optimal performance environments	Coaches: *consider individual while keeping sight of the bigger picture* Both: *create group cohesion and welcoming atmosphere, set common goals*
Explicit conflict prevention	Self-regulation	Coaches: *be diplomatic not forceful* Athletes: *compliancy to coach* Both: *calm down, think before you speak, be patient*
	Empathy	Both: *take perspective, consider positive intentions behind actions, consider consequences of own behaviors*
	Communicating expectations and potential problems	Coaches: *be a role model, establish rules and expectations, identify goals* Athletes: *seek clarification, address concerns, negotiate* Both: *set common goals*
	Timing of strategies	Both: *communicate concerns and expectations in advance* Athletes: *use individual meetings*
	Instruction and feedback style	Coaches: *find balance between criticism/encouragement, structured negative feedback with clear reason and outlook* Athletes: *intrateam processes, coach–athlete relationship*
	Team composition and athlete leadership	Coaches: *consider interpersonal relationships and contact time when planning team composition; help new athletes integrate into team and organization* Both: *athlete leaders bridge between coach and team*

(*Appendix continues*)

Table A2
Conflict Management Strategies and Barriers

Subcategory	Theme	Strategies suggested for coaches and athletes
Role responsibilities	Conflict solver	Coaches: *create awareness for conflict, initiate and guide through conflict management, be calm and rational*
	Leaders of performance	Athletes: *recognize/address problems that impact performance, be responsive to coaches' resolution efforts*
Intrapersonal strategies	Self-regulation, reflection, and preparation	Coaches: *control emotions, gather information about conflict circumstances, read about potential issues, monitor and document athlete behaviors*
		Athletes: *vent emotions without targeting coach, withdraw from situation, take notes about concerns*
		Both: *self-reflect, reassess, rationalize, prioritize*
	Avoidance	Both: *use individual coping strategies, be proactive*
Interpersonal strategies	Co-regulation	Coaches: *be a sounding board to athletes, provide space and time for athletes to deal with own emotions*
	Acknowledge responsibilities	Athletes: *apologetic gestures*
		Both: *acknowledge mistakes and apologize*
	Collaborate and compromise	Coaches: *be open for negotiations*
		Both: *negotiate and make concessions, mainly related to competition- and training-related conflicts, set goals*
	Forcing	Coaches: *non-negotiables in regard to behavioral conduct and team issues, commanding communication,*
		Athletes: *non-negotiables in regard to health and career*
	Obliging	Athletes: *compliance to coaches' perceived power or actual acceptance of coaches' leadership*
	Communication	Coaches: *show interest and care, questions, active listening, paraphrasing, educate, encourage self-reflection, challenge*
		Both: *share opinions, needs, and expectations; give reasons for their behaviors and decisions; set new goals*
External support	Friends and family	Both: *vent frustration and ask for advice*
	Team members	Athletes: *vent frustration*
	Staff members	Coaches: *ask for advice and help, gather information*
		Athletes: *improve skills, find mediator (sport psychologist)*
	Mentoring	Coaches: *improve skills and ask for advice*
Conflict management barriers	Low coach–athlete relationship quality (e.g., poor communication, power)	
	Lacking awareness (e.g., existence/intensity of conflict)	
	Willingness and priorities (e.g., time/energy restrictions)	
	Intention/action discrepancies (e.g., no follow-up on agreement)	

(*Appendix continues*)

Table A3
Conflict Outcomes

Subcategory	Theme	Outcomes experienced by coaches and athletes
Intrapersonal outcomes	Well-being	Athletes: *low/depressive mood, sleep problems, enhanced risk for injuries, low self-esteem*
		Both: *high stress, rumination*
	Sport development	Coaches: *enhanced/decreased coaching efficacy*
		Athletes: *enhanced sport-related skills and resilience*
	Personal growth	Athletes: *self-awareness, communication skills, critical thinking, open-mindedness, empathy*
Performance outcomes	Positive outcomes	Athletes: *effective solution that increases performance potential, better work ethic and motivation, better performance during competition*
	Negative outcomes	Athletes: *performance stagnation or slumps due to lack of focus, motivation and energy*
Interpersonal outcomes	Termination	Coaches: *athlete suspension*
		Athletes: *change coach/club, end career*
	Relationship quality	Both: *promoted or decreased confidence in the relationship, communication, trust and respect*
	Other relationships	Coaches: *increased/decreased influence upon team*
		Athletes: *improved relationships with other coaches*

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