



## The Effects of Perceived Coach Leadership on Athlete's Burnout: Implications for Quality of Coach-Athlete Relationship

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### Abstract

**Background:** Numerous studies have explored the effect of coach-athlete relationships on athletes' burnout, yet there has been a notable gap in the mediating role of coach leadership.

**Aim:** This study sought to investigate how perceived coach leadership affects athlete burnout and its implications for the quality of coach-athlete relationships.

**Methods:** A total of 248 athletes from individual, dual, and team sports participated, comprising 142 (57.26%) males and 106 (42.74%) females, aged between 18 and 35 years ( $M = 20.24$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ), all based in Iligan City. The study examined the variables and their connections by employing a descriptive-correlational methodology. The researchers utilize a snowball sampling technique to expand the sample through referrals.

**Results:** The findings revealed that coach leadership does not directly mediate the relationship between the coach-athlete dynamic and athlete burnout. However, the quality of the coach-athlete relationship significantly impacts burnout. Key relationship factors, such as emotional closeness, complementarity, and commitment, play crucial roles. Athletes who reported stronger relational bonds with their coaches, characterized by trust, open communication, and shared goals, experienced lower levels of burnout. Conversely, weaker relationships, marked by conflict or lack of emotional connection, were linked to higher burnout levels.

**Conclusion:** While coach leadership does not serve as a mediator, it plays a vital role in fostering a supportive coach-athlete relationship, significantly reducing burnout. This study emphasizes the significance of fostering robust relationships between coaches and athletes to reduce athlete burnout. Sports coaches should prioritize relationship-building over merely employing leadership skills since this can significantly enhance an athlete's emotional resilience and mental well-being. Coaches must emphasize cultivating closeness with athletes by promoting open communication, trust, and empathy.

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### INTRODUCTION

Pursuing athletic excellence often requires significant physical and mental commitment (Graña et al., 2021; Popovych et al., 2022). However, a critical threat to an athlete's career is burnout, a condition that can severely impact performance and well-being (González-García et al., 2019). Research has consistently linked athlete burnout to diminished self-confidence and reduced motivation (Fransen et al., 2020). As the most extreme form of maladaptation to training, burnout manifests through physical and psychological symptoms, emerging when an athlete's capacity to cope with training stress becomes exhausted (Akhrem & Gazdowska, 2016). This syndrome is often characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, a declining passion for the sport, and a reduced sense of accomplishment (González-García et al., 2019; Graña et al., 2021). Given the complexity of athlete burnout, recent studies have underscored the need for a more comprehensive understanding of its underlying causes, with particular attention to the influence of coach leadership behaviours on burnout (Peng et al., 2020; Popovych et al., 2022). Understanding these dynamics is essential for

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developing strategies to prevent burnout and support athlete longevity in their sport. This study addresses a notable gap in the literature by examining the mediating role of coach leadership in the relationship between coach-athlete dynamics and athlete burnout. Although previous research has explored the importance of leadership styles, this study uniquely investigates how these leadership behaviors influence burnout through the lens of the coach-athlete relationship, which has been found to play a pivotal role in performance and well-being (Choi et al., 2020).

The relationship between the coach and the athlete greatly impacts the athlete's physical and mental health, as well as their general comfort and happiness (Longakit et al., 2024). The interpersonal connection between coaches and athletes is pivotal to the coaching process, vital for achieving optimal performance, and indispensable for assuring athlete's continuous achievement (Choi et al., 2020). According to Gerber et al. (2024), other studies have found that higher-quality coach-athlete relationships were associated with more positive characteristics. To foster happiness and well-being, the bond between coach and athlete has been identified as a critical element of happiness and well-being (Gosai et al., 2021), and it serves as a support system during challenging periods such as injury and emotional setbacks (Jowett, 2017). Nevertheless, Gerber et al. (2024) found that when coaches engage in emotionally abusive behaviors such as screaming and belittlement, it leads to burnout in athletes. This underscores the significance of fostering robust and encouraging coach-athlete connections to prevent exhaustion and burnout. The research conducted by McGee and DeFreese (2019) examined the components of the CAR, specifically closeness, commitment, and complementarity, and their impact on athlete burnout and engagement among female rowers in college. The results showed that a strong bond between athlete and coach was linked to lower overall athlete burnout throughout the competitive season. In particular, during the sports season, a substantial negative correlation was observed between burnout and the closeness indicator of the coach-athlete relationship. The study also discovered that this measure of closeness was inversely correlated with burnout indicators, including emotional and physical exhaustion, as well as a reduced sense of accomplishment. These findings align with the study's hypotheses and the existing research of DeFreese and Smith (2014) on where the coach-athlete relationship. Closeness refers to the emotional bond between coach and athlete, while reduced accomplishment entails an athlete's sense of falling short of personal goals or expectations. Athletes with a stronger sense of closeness with their coaches are more likely to see themselves as more competent, skilled, and capable in their sporting pursuits (Longakit et al., 2023).

On the other hand, if any component of the athlete and coach relationship is not supported, it can result in conflict and negative psychological consequences, eventually leading to signs of athlete burnout (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004; Longakit et al., 2023). A study by López de Subijana et al. (2021) demonstrated that the quality of the coach-athlete relationships could be predicted by perceptions of coach leadership behaviors such as individualized consideration, appropriate role modeling, and fostering acceptance of group goals and teamwork. These behaviors were positively correlated with the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Furthermore, when comparing genders, males exhibited greater levels of leadership in terms of role modeling and intellectual stimulation, as well as seeing the coach and athlete relationship to be of higher quality (López de Subijana et al., 2021). Moreover, building a quality relationship is vital to an effective and successful one (Hampson & Jowett, 2012; Longakit et al., 2023). Research has shown that coach leadership is associated with a wide range of positive and negative outcomes for athletes, including coping abilities, satisfaction, burnout, emotions, sports performance, collective efficacy, and even injury risk (González-García et al., 2019; Gerber et al., 2024). Different leadership styles can significantly impact athletes' performance in beneficial or detrimental ways. For instance, autocratic leadership limits athletes' ability to make internal decisions, as they must strictly follow the coach's commands and instructions (Jin et al., 2022). In contrast, democratic leadership allows for shared decision-making, empowering team captains or group leaders to take on responsibility, thus fostering team growth and development (Cruz & Kim, 2017).

Transformational leadership theory focuses on leaders who inspire and motivate their followers to transcend their interests for a greater collective goal (Stenling & Tafvelin, 2014; Macquet & Stanton, 2021). This leadership style emphasizes visionary thinking, emotional engagement, and personal development, distinguishing it from transactional leadership, which relies on rewards and punishments to achieve compliance (Bosselut et al., 2020). Transformational leaders do not just

manage tasks or behaviors; instead, they create an environment where followers are empowered to think creatively, grow personally and professionally, and strive toward higher levels of achievement (Macquet & Stanton, 2021). The leader works to elevate the team's morale and encourages a sense of commitment and enthusiasm for the shared vision. The theory is centered around four key components known as the "Four I's." Idealized Influence refers to the leader serving as a strong role model, exhibiting behaviors that followers admire and seek to emulate. For instance, coaches and leaders become role models, demonstrating the behaviors and attitudes they wish to see in their athletes, thus earning their trust and respect (Oh, 2023). Inspirational motivation involves the leader communicating a clear and compelling vision that energizes followers and gives them a sense of purpose (Oh, 2023; Macquet & Stanton, 2021). Coaches and team leaders embody this leadership style by setting a compelling vision, inspiring athletes to embrace it, and promoting a culture of continuous growth and development (Mach et al., 2021). Intellectual Stimulation encourages followers to challenge the status quo, think independently, and explore new solutions to problems, encouraging creativity in problem-solving, adaptability during games, and innovation in training methods (Oh, 2023; Macquet & Stanton, 2021; Bosselut et al., 2020). Finally, Individualized Consideration emphasizes personalized attention and mentorship, where the leader recognizes each follower's unique needs and aspirations, helping them achieve their potential. Through these elements, transformational leaders can foster a strong sense of belonging, loyalty, and engagement, ultimately leading to sustained success and innovation in any organization or group. The theoretical basis of leadership, particularly in transformational leadership, highlights the importance of relational traits in leadership (Mach et al., 2021). Transformational leadership aligns with motivational theories such as the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which suggests that individuals thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied. Transformational leadership is significant in sports because of its inspirational and collaborative nature. Coaches who adopt this approach aim to cultivate strong team attributes, such as interdependence, a unified identity, and a shared sense of purpose. This leadership style is characterized by structured communication and joint decision-making processes, which promote cohesion and motivation among athletes (Mach & Abrantes, 2021).

Leaders and followers exhibit a reciprocal relationship characterized by trust, respect, and dedication to the shared objective, which involves collaborating to achieve common (Hampson & Jowett, 2012). Moreover, prior studies have established notable connections between leadership characteristics and coach burnout (Khan et al., 2020). It is stressed in their work that coaches' autocratic behavior shows a negative link with depersonalization and a positive link with reduced personal accomplishment. This claim was further supported by the study of Khan et al. (2020) indicated the findings that emphasized the importance of coaches exercising caution when employing directive behavior. This is mainly a product of the inappropriate use of directive behavior that can significantly diminish team motivation and performance while eroding team spirit and camaraderie among players.

Several studies have been conducted that aim to examine the complexity of coach-athlete relationships on athlete burnout. However, there is a lack of evidence of how coach leadership interplay between coach-athlete relationships and athlete burnout. In light of these insights, this study explored the mediating role of coach leadership on coach-athlete relationships and athlete burnout. Thus, this study hypothesized that CAR factors influence athletes' burnout ( $H_1$ ). Additionally, the transformational leadership mediates between CAR and Burnout ( $H_2$ )

## METHOD

### *Research Design*

The study employed a quantitative method within a correlation research design, complemented by a descriptive-correlational approach to investigate the relationships between key variables. This approach allowed insights into the coach-athlete relationship's impact on athlete burnout, with perceived coach leadership as a potential mediating factor. The researchers utilized purposive sampling with a snowball effect called chain-referral sampling. To examine the effects of perceived coach leadership on athlete burnout and its implications for the coach-athlete relationship quality, the researchers conducted the study using standardized online questionnaires administered to eligible participants.

### *Participant*

The study involved 248 participants engaging in individual, dual, and team sports. The study comprised 142 (57.26%) male and 106 (42.74%) female athletes. The participants ranged from 18 to 35 years old, with a mean age of 20.24 (SD= 2.02). All contestants were located in Iligan City. In addition, the athletes' sample participated in their respective sports at different levels, with 25% competing in division meets, 44.05% in regional meets, 26.19% in national meets, and 4.67% in international meets.

### *Instruments*

The socio-demographic profile questionnaire, often called a demographic survey, is a vital instrument in this study to capture essential information about the participants. It encompasses a range of demographic variables, including name, age, sex, parent's monthly income, name of school, and sport. By collecting this socio-demographic data, our study aims to explore whether certain demographic factors might influence the relationship between coach leadership, the coach-athlete relationship, and athlete burnout.

The Coach-athlete relationship questionnaire (CART-Q) was used to assess the quality and substance of the connection between a coach and an athlete (Jowett and Ntoumanis, 2004). Comprised of 11 items. Examples of each question statement include: "I feel close to my coach," "I feel committed to my coach," "I feel that my sports career is promising with my coach," and "I like my coach." The response scale ranges from 1, indicating "strongly disagree," to 7, representing "strongly agree." The reliability of the three subscales is  $\alpha=.957$  (Commitment),  $\alpha=.978$  (Closeness), and  $\alpha=.980$  (Complementarity). The CART-Q scale demonstrated a strong level of reliability, evidenced by the obtained result of a Cronbach's alpha of .989.

Differentiated Transformational Leadership Inventory (DTLI) was used to measure the coach leadership style and will delve into the multifaceted aspects of transformational leadership and its influence within the sports context. It comprises 26 items drawn from two established scales: the MLQ-5X (Bass & Avolio, 1995) and the TLI (Podsakoff et al., 1990). The DTLI used three items from MLQ-5X; the rest were from TLI. The DTLI assesses various dimensions, including individual consideration (adapted from MLQ-5X), inspiration motivation (also adapted from MLQ-5X), intellectual stimulation (borrowed from TLI), fostering acceptance of group goals (from TLI), high-performance expectations (from TLI). Several studies confirmed the factors structure of the DTLI revealed acceptable and adequate levels of internal consistency (Peng et al., 2020; Schermuly & Meyer, 2020). The individual subscales also exhibited high reliability, with  $\alpha=.718$  for individual consideration,  $\alpha=.853$  for inspirational motivation,  $\alpha=.856$  for intellectual stimuli,  $\alpha=.877$  for fostering acceptance of group goals and teamwork,  $\alpha=.831$  for high-performance expectations,  $\alpha=.907$  for appropriate role model, and  $\alpha=.865$  for contingent reward. The reliability of the DTLI scale shows high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .969.

The Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ) has been customized for application in athletes participating in various sports disciplines. This adapted version comprises 15 items thoughtfully divided into three distinct burnout-related components (physical and emotional exhaustion, sports devaluation, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment), with five items assigned to each component. These components encompass. Previous studies indicate that the subscales of ABQ have acceptable validity, internal consistency, and test-retest reliability (Raedeke & Smith, 2001). By utilizing this modified ABQ, researchers can assess the multidimensional nature of burnout experienced by athletes, offering valuable insights into their physical and emotional well-being, perceptions of the sport, and feelings of personal achievement. Each subscale also exhibited high reliability, with  $\alpha=.679$  for reduced sense of accomplishment,  $\alpha=.886$  for emotional/physical exhaustion, and  $\alpha=.856$  for devaluation. The ABQ scale demonstrated strong reliability, evicted by a Cronbach's alpha of .934.

### *Procedures*

The researchers prepared a set and standardized questionnaire survey coming from the different related variables, including the CART-Q (Athlete's Version), Differentiated Transformational Leadership Inventory (DTLI), and Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ), which

numerous reputable researchers employed in their successful studies. Furthermore, the data-gathering procedure for this study involves administering a structured questionnaire to a minimum sample of 250 qualified athletes in Iligan City. A crucial initial step in this research process before the final data gathering procedure, Pilot testing, is being conducted. Provided the researchers with invaluable insights into the feasibility, effectiveness, and potential concerns of the research design and the study's methodology. The main objective of pilot testing is to improve the study's validity, reliability, and general quality, laying a solid foundation for subsequent data collection and analysis.

In this study, 30 eligible athletes were invited to participate voluntarily in the pilot testing phase, with clear communication about its objectives and importance in informing the study's development. The research questionnaires were carried out through online surveys using Google Forms, ensuring flexibility and convenience for the respondents. All participants completed the consent form to uphold ethical standards and protect their privacy. The chosen athletes are a broad group, picked via snowball random selection, based on numerous factors like sport kind, competitive level, and age group. The collected data included demographic information, responses to questionnaire items, and any additional variables that may influence athlete burnout. Then, it was further validated by consulting the experts in the field of statistics, which is subject to quantitative analysis, including statistical tests and analyses, to examine relationships and potential moderating factors between how the coaching leadership affects coach-athlete relationship, coach-athlete relationship impacts athlete burnout; coach leadership interplay athletes' burnout, and their influence in between. Thus, researchers can interpret the result of the data, which contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

### Data Analysis

Mediation analysis used the JASP V.18.2 to determine whether coach-athlete relationships will impact Athlete Burnout, mediated by perceived coach leadership. Before mediation analysis, the data will be checked, and values that don't seem to be there will be filled in randomly using the expectations-maximization (EM) imputation method. To verify internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was used to compute every scale item. Preliminary data analysis assessed the instrument's reliability, frequency, mean, and standard deviation on demographic variables. A multiple regression was utilized to identify the relationships among the variables of interest in this study. The indirect effects of the parallel mediators will be analyzed using a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 resamples. The study assessed the indirect, direct, and overall effects of coach leadership, coach-athlete relationships, and athlete burnout while accounting for the potential influence of age, gender, and level of engagement.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

**Table 1.** Multiple Regression Analysis

	Unstandardized	Standard Error	p	Lower	Upper
<b>Clo</b>	-0.368	0.132	0.006	-0.628	-0.108
<b>Comp</b>	-0.396	0.132	0.003	-0.656	-0.136
<b>Comm</b>	-0.436	0.178	0.015	-0.786	-0.085
<b>CAR Total</b>	-0.139	0.049	0.005	-0.235	-0.042

Dependent: Burnout

Note: Clo= Closeness; Comp= Complementarity; Comm= Commitment; CAR= Coach-Athlete Relationship

**Table 1** analyzes the association between coaches and athletes and burnout. The data presented in Table 1 indicates that the coach-athlete relationship had a statistically significant impact on burnout, as evidenced by the p-values of 0.006, 0.003, and 0.015 for closeness, complementarity, and commitment, respectively. These p-values are all below the traditional threshold of 0.05. Furthermore, there is an association between CAR and burnout ( $B = -0.139$ ,  $SE = 0.049$ ), Commitment ( $B = -0.436$ ,  $SE = 0.178$ ), closeness ( $B = -0.368$ ,  $SE = 0.132$ ), and complementarity ( $B = -0.396$ ,  $SE =$



0.132). The unstandardized coefficient quantifies the magnitude and direction of the correlation between each element of the coach-athlete relationship and burnout. A negative coefficient indicates that burnout decreases as the degree of intimacy, complementarity, and commitment rises. Thus,  $H_1$  is accepted.

The results from [Table 1](#) provide compelling evidence that the quality of the Coach-Athlete Relationship (CAR) plays a crucial role in reducing athlete burnout. Specifically, the negative coefficients for closeness, complementarity, and commitment show that burnout decreases as these relational factors improve. The strongest effect is seen with commitment, which means that athletes are less likely to experience the emotional exhaustion and disengagement that come with burnout when coaches and athletes show mutual dedication and loyalty to their relationships and goals. The strong links between each CAR factor and burnout suggest that working on the relationships between coaches and athletes could be equally crucial for avoiding burnout as vigorous physical activity ([Choi et al., 2020](#); [Gerber et al., 2024](#)). These results have practical implications for how coaches do their jobs. Focusing on interpersonal abilities like getting to know their athletes (closeness), making sure their teaching styles fit their needs (complementarity), and getting everyone to work together toward common goals can help coaches ([Longakit et al., 2024](#); [Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2016](#)).

Moreover, coaches can help create a more supportive and less stressful environment for athletes, which can improve mental well-being and performance ([Jin et al., 2022](#)). These results suggest that sports organizations should incorporate relationship-building strategies into coach training programs to enhance athletes' emotional and psychological resilience. The clear link between strong coach-athlete relationships and reduced burnout underscores the importance of cultivating emotional intelligence and communication skills in coaching, especially in high-pressure sports environments where athletes are particularly vulnerable to burnout.

**Table 2.** Analysis of the Mediating Effect of Coach Leadership in Sports on the Relationship between Coach-Athlete Relationship and Athlete's Burnout

Pathways	Estimate	SE	z-value	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower	Upper
CL → AB	0.028	0.059	0.467	0.641	-0.088	0.143
CAR → AB	-0.148	0.053	-2.815	0.005	-0.251	-0.045
CAR → CL	0.330	0.056	5.886	<.001	0.220	0.440
CAR → CL → AB	0.009	0.020	0.465	0.642	-0.029	0.047

*Note:* All coefficients are standardized. CL = coach leadership; CAR = coach-athlete relationship; and AB = athlete burnout.

[Table 2](#) shows that perceived coach leadership does not mediate the relationship between the coach-athlete relationship and burnout. Therefore, it can be concluded that coach leadership does not play a substantial role in mediating between coaches and athletes' relationship and the occurrence of athlete burnout. The estimated direct effect of perceived coach leadership on athlete burnout is 0.028, with a p-value of 0.641. This indicates that coach leadership does not have a significant direct impact on athlete burnout. Conversely, the coach-athlete relationship has an estimated direct effect of -0.148 on athlete burnout, with a p-value of 0.005, showing a significant negative direct impact. The coefficient of the coach-athlete relationship (CAR) on coach leadership is estimated at .330, with a p-value of less than 0.001. This indicates a significant positive impact of the coach-athlete relationship on athlete burnout through coach leadership, estimated at 0.009, with a p-value of 0.642. This suggests that the indirect effect is not statistically significant. Hence, the findings indicate that the relationship between athletes and coaches has a notable adverse impact on athlete burnout when mediated by coach leadership. The role of coach leadership as a mediator between coach and athlete relationship and burnout is found to be insignificant. This suggests that the indirect effect is not statistically significant. Hence, the findings indicate that the coach-athlete

relationship has a notable adverse impact on athlete burnout and a noteworthy beneficial impact on coach leadership.

Nevertheless, the statistical analysis shows that the coach-athlete relationship does not substantially impact athlete burnout when mediated by coach leadership. The role of coach leadership as a mediator in the relationship between coach-athlete interactions and athlete fatigue is found to be insignificant. Thus,  $H_2$  is rejected.

These findings have important implications for coaching strategies and athlete management. Coaches should prioritize building strong relationships with athletes over focusing solely on leadership techniques to mitigate burnout. While leadership styles might still be valuable in other aspects of athlete development, their role in preventing burnout seems minimal, according to these results. This suggests that closeness, commitment, and fostering mutual understanding and trust between coaches and athletes are more essential in preventing burnout than merely adopting specific leadership styles. Therefore, training programs for coaches should emphasize relational skills more and less leadership development, as the latter does not appear to significantly impact the relationship between CAR and athlete burnout.

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine the role of coach leadership as a mediator in the connection between coach-athlete relationship (CAR) and burnout. The results indicate a significant negative association between coach-athlete relationships and burnout, where factors such as closeness, complementarity, and commitment have important influences. Previous studies have consistently highlighted the importance of interpersonal dynamics between coaches and athletes in promoting athlete well-being and performance. Still, this research adds nuance by showing that specific components of the CAR (i.e., closeness, complementarity, and commitment) are directly tied to reducing athlete burnout (Choi et al., 2020; Gerber et al., 2024). The negative coefficients showed that a stronger relationship between coaches and athletes directly leads to lower levels of burnout. This supports the idea that emotional support and having the same goals as coaches are very important. Notably, athletes who perceive higher levels of closeness with their coaches tend to exhibit greater competence and resilience, while conflicts in the relationship could potentially lead to burnout symptoms (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). In addition, studies have indicated that athletes perceive their relationship with coaches as a contributing element to the development of burnout (Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2016; DeFreese & Smith, 2014).

Moreover, the results suggest that coach leadership does not significantly buffer the association between the Coach-Athlete relationship (CAR) and athlete burnout, providing an intriguing perspective when analyzed through the framework of Transformational Leadership Theory. Transformational leadership is defined by actions that inspire and motivate followers to go beyond their expectations and align with overarching team or organizational objectives. It highlights essential elements such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, which theoretically should mitigate burnout by cultivating a supportive and encouraging atmosphere (Macquet & Stanton, 2021). Nonetheless, the findings of this study contradict the notion that transformational leadership is sufficient in alleviating athlete burnout. Although transformational leadership has been recognized for its capacity to improve motivation and performance across various contexts (Sterling et al., 2014; Bosselut et al., 2020), the insignificant mediating effect of coach leadership on the CAR and burnout relationship indicates that leadership behaviors do not significantly impact burnout as directly as the quality of the interpersonal relationship between coach and athlete. This suggests that transformative leadership behaviors, such as establishing a vision or offering intellectual challenges, may diminish burnout without essential relationship components (closeness, complementarity, commitment).

A plausible reason, consistent with Transformational Leadership Theory, is that transformational leaders must initially cultivate trust and rapport with their athletes, which are fundamental components of the CAR, to achieve effectiveness. If athletes lack a sense of connection or alignment with their coach, leadership behaviors such as inspirational motivating may not be effective and may consequently fail to mitigate burnout (Mach et al., 2021; Stenling et al., 2014). Transformational leadership is significant; nevertheless, it may not function effectively in isolation, robust, supportive connections are essential for the efficacy of leadership behaviors (Zhao and

Jowett, 2022; Vella et al., 2013). This study posits that the influence of transformational leadership on burnout may depend on the robustness of the coach-athlete relationship. This finding simplifies the current application of Transformational Leadership Theory in sports by suggesting that the relational dynamics between coaches and athletes are essential for mitigating burnout. Without robust interpersonal connections, even highly driven and transformational leaders may struggle to mitigate athlete burnout. This contribution enhances the theory, indicating that for transformational leadership to be effective in this realm, it must be underpinned by a robust relational context that satisfies the athlete's psychological requirements, as delineated in other frameworks like Self-Determination Theory.

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of the coach-athlete relationship (CAR) on athlete burnout. Specifically, closeness, complementarity, and commitment are critical in reducing burnout, suggesting that interpersonal dynamics between coaches and athletes serve as a buffer against stress and burnout. The lack of a mediating effect from coach leadership, particularly through the lens of Transformational Leadership Theory, suggests that leadership alone may not prevent burnout unless strong relational bonds between the coach and athlete support it. This has practical implications for coaching strategies, emphasizing that fostering strong connections may be more beneficial in preventing burnout than focusing solely on leadership behaviors like motivation and intellectual stimulation. This study adds to the literature on sports psychology by delving into the specific components of the coach-athlete relationship that contribute to athlete well-being. While existing research has established the importance of CAR in performance and motivation, this study offers a more nuanced view by isolating the elements of closeness, complementarity, and commitment.

#### *Research Contribution*

It also contributes to understanding Transformational Leadership Theory within a sports context, showing that leadership behaviors may not directly alleviate burnout without a strong interpersonal foundation. The study thus bridges a gap by connecting relational dynamics with leadership models, reinforcing that effective leadership must be grounded in trust and rapport.

#### *Limitations*

While the study provides valuable insights, it has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences between CAR, coach leadership, and burnout. Future studies would benefit from longitudinal approaches to better understand the temporal dynamics of these relationships. Additionally, the study focuses on a specific set of constructs (i.e., closeness, complementarity, commitment) within the coach-athlete relationship, which may not capture the full complexity of interpersonal dynamics that could influence burnout. Moreover, the sample size and demographic limitations may reduce the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or sports.

#### *Suggestions*

Based on the limitations and findings, future research should explore longitudinal designs to assess how CAR and leadership behaviors evolve and their long-term effects on athlete burnout. Additionally, expanding the study to include a broader range of interpersonal and contextual factors, such as conflict resolution, communication styles, or the role of peer support, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of what influences burnout. Investigating how other leadership models interact with the CAR to impact athlete well-being could provide further insights. Finally, applying these findings to different sports and competitive levels may help create more generalized strategies for preventing burnout across various athletic contexts.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study emphasizes the significance of fostering robust relationships between coaches and athletes to reduce athlete burnout. Sports coaches should prioritize relationship-building over merely employing leadership skills since this can significantly enhance an athlete's emotional resilience and mental well-being. Coaches must emphasize cultivating closeness with athletes by



promoting open communication, trust, and empathy. Ensuring complementarity by adapting coaching approaches to meet individual athlete requirements and improving commitment by aligning common objectives can foster a supportive atmosphere that decreases burnout. Sports organizations can implement these findings by providing coaches with training programs emphasizing interpersonal competencies, including effective communication, active listening, and conflict resolution. Consistent team-building activities and individual monitoring can enhance the relationship between coaches and athletes, fostering an atmosphere where players feel acknowledged and appreciated.

Moreover, tailored coaching strategies that account for athletes' distinctive preferences and requirements can enhance complementarity and commitment, diminishing burnout risk. Additionally, investigating the longitudinal effects of the coach-athlete relationship on burnout might yield profound insights into the persistence of these relationship elements over time. Furthermore, analyzing the impact of various sports contexts (e.g., individual versus team sports) on the relationship between CAR and burnout may facilitate the development of more tailored treatments. Future research may explore additional potential mediators, such as emotional intelligence or psychological safety, to ascertain how these elements interact with CAR in reducing burnout. This would offer a comprehensive understanding of how relational and psychological factors converge to affect athlete well-being.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

CJD and KI contributed to the introduction and discussion of this study. JCL helped with the proofreading, statistics, and interpretation of results.

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