

# Understanding the female judoka's "coach – athlete" relationship: a British perspective

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## Authors' Contribution:

- A Study Design
- B Data Collection
- C Statistical Analysis
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## Abstract

### Background & Study Aim:

The initial idea for the investigation came from Maki Tsukada's two year observation of the British system, but also after reflection on the London 2012 Olympics and the "coach – athlete" interaction. The wider impact of the study will mean that coaches will have a greater understanding of how to build and work at their relationship with their athletes and understand what the important dynamics are within. The purpose of this study was the knowledge about the "coach – athlete" relationship, to gain a greater understanding into the relationship between female judo athletes and their coach.

### Material & Methods:

The participants chosen were the Women's Great Britain Judo Squad 2013, the athletes (n = 36) and the National coaches (n = 2). The study explores what is felt as important, the dynamics in the relationship and does the athlete's opinion differ from that of the coach. The athletes participated in a specifically designed questionnaire and the coaches in semi-structured interview.

### Results:

The findings demonstrate the importance of the relationship and the varying, yet often similar attributes expressed, from both the athletes and coaches.

### Conclusions:

The significant and fundamental finding was the importance of the "coach – athlete" relationship being recognised by both the athletes and the coaches, with the athletes declaring that they definitely need a coach to develop and improve. In a direct comparison on what is important to the athlete and to the coach in the dynamic of the relationship, the points are very similar.

### Key words:

athletes motivation • combat sports • qualitative methodology • semi-structured interviews • sports psychology

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**Athlete** – *noun* 1. someone who has the abilities necessary for participating in physical exercise, especially in competitive games and races 2. a competitor in track or field events [26].

**Coach** – *noun* someone who trains sports players or athletes verb to train someone in a sport [26].

**Combat sport** – *noun* a sport in which one person fights another, e.g. wrestling, boxing and the martial arts [26].

**Motivation** – *noun* 1. the act of giving somebody a reason or incentive to do something 2. a feeling of enthusiasm, interest, or commitment that makes somebody want to do something, or something that causes such a feeling 3. the biological, emotional, cognitive, or social forces that activate and direct behaviour [26].

**Sports psychology** – *noun* the scientific study of the mental state of sportspeople, looking at issues such as motivation, concentration, stress and self-confidence [26].

## INTRODUCTION

The “*coach – athlete*” relationship is defined as “the situation in which coaches’ and athletes’ emotions, thoughts, and behaviours are mutually and causally inter-connected” [1, p. 249; 2, p. 257]. It has been widely speculated in the literature that the relationship has many factors and variables that must be assessed to deemed a good relationship. Bennie and O’Connor [3] recognise in their study that two types of “*coach – athlete*” relationships exists; ‘professional’ and ‘close’. Both relationships have equal outcomes but only if the coach and the athlete share the same attitude towards the relationship, only then will an opportunity for a strong relationship exist. If one is in disagreement with the relationship chances for conflict will occur. This highlights the importance of accessing both the coach and the athlete to gain a comprehensive overview of the relationship.

Jowett [4] stresses the fundamental importance of having an effective “*coach – athlete*” relationship, as a crucial determinant of athlete’s satisfaction, motivation and maximising performance. Several studies [5-7] also stated that motivation is a key competent to provide success in an individual athlete and is influenced by the “*coach – athlete*” relationship. Agreeing with this statement in the paper written by Mageau and Vallerand [8] ‘the “*coach – athlete*” relationship: a motivational model’ they conclude how certain coaching styles can have an impact on the athletes motivation. Which is interesting as different cultures and coaches have very different coaching styles. Smith and Smoll [9], Poczwardowski et al. [10], Jowett and Cockerill [11] go on to say the relationships of coaches and athletes will affect the physical and psychosocial development and growth of the athletes’ success. In this study the coach realised that after poor results in competitions the coaching style had to change, this change increased the bonds between the coach and the athletes (“*coach – athlete*” relationship) and athlete’s performance excelled and 4 gold medals were won [8]. These theories could have explanations why London 2012 has been one of the most successful Olympic Games for women’s British judo and the least successful in 24 years for the Japanese team.

*BBC Sport* (2012) reported that during the 2012 Olympics the Women’s British judo team had a successful Olympics, resulting in two medals, one of which was the first medal Great Britain won in 12 years, whereas Japan had their worst

Olympic Games in 24 years, in terms of medals. This resulted in a media frenzy with athletes speaking out against their coaches and a complete breakdown of the “*coach – athlete*” relationship. In the press it was reported by *The Independent Newspaper* (2013) that the athletes were “slapped, kicked and beaten with bamboo” and overall abused by their coach much of the research in this area on the “*coach – athlete*” relationship assists in explaining the implication of the coach’s action onto the athlete and therefore their performance.

Stirling and Kerr [12, p. 96] recognised “numerous athletes implied that the experience of emotionally abusive coaching practices could initially increase their motivation to exert their best efforts in training. However increased abuse directly reduces the enjoyment of the sport/ task for the athlete this could cause decreased performance and even dropouts. This has serious effects such as negative training effects including a decline in motivation, impaired focus, and difficulty acquiring new skills.”

Since Maki Tsukada had observed the British system prior to 2012 and had seen the benefits of the British way, it was decided that the “*coach – athlete*” relationship was of great interest and needed further examination. To achieve this, both the athletes and the coaches were spoken to.

The purpose of this study was the knowledge about the “*coach – athlete*” relationship, to gain a greater understanding into the relationship between female judo athletes and their coach.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Participants

The participants recruited in this study are from the 2013 Great Britain National Women’s Judo Squad (n = 36) programme and the two coaches.

The research strategy is that of action research, whilst the research design was informed by the ontological and epistemological position of both researchers. Recognising their position within their respective National Governing Bodies and the experience they have working at this level.

### Questionnaires

The athletes were asked to complete a specifically designed questionnaire given to them at National Squad Training and then two National coaches were interviewed. It was of significance to the

study to get both the athlete and the coach’s perspective, in agreement to [3] to get a comprehensive overview of the relationship from both the coach and athlete. In addition, Jowett [13, p.79] suggested that “much of the past research conducted to study the dynamics between coaches and their athletes has failed to include both relationship members” thus in the study both have been taken into account and analysed.

The questions given to the athletes were open and helped gauge the opinion of the athletes on the “coach – athlete” relationship, whilst the interviews were semi-structured and followed the themes outlined in the questionnaire. Many studies involving the coach-athlete relationship used open ended questionnaires for assessing the quality of the relationship [1, 14, 15]. In agreement [16] also suggested to use semi-structured interviews with questions that enquire coaches and athletes to explain their insight of effective relationships.

Initially the questionnaires included 26 questions which were developed to investigate specific areas highlighted in the literature that are thought to be prevalent in a “coach – athlete” relationship similar to studies such as Jowett [2, 4, 8, 13]. Although, Jowett [4] had developed and validated a Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q) to assess the quality and characteristics of the “coach – athlete” relationship, it was recognised that, although the CART-Q already exists, the need for new questionnaires must be developed for specific measures of sporting areas and assessment of relationships meaning the CART-Q can’t always be used [17]. The developed questions from this questionnaire were then utilised to address the themes in the semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed and the results are explained in three sections: *athlete*; *coach*; *coach and athlete*.

The analysis of the athlete’s questionnaire were grouped into three distinctive areas: a general background and overview of the athletes beginning into judo and views of their coaching interactions; a more specific look into a statistical analysis; and a very distinct review of their coach-athlete experience.

## RESULTS

### Athlete

The two main reasons listed as to why athletes initially partake in judo was stated as either

because of family and friends already participating or that a coach came to their school. Whilst their initial inception into the sport is of interest, it is their continual journey and interaction with coaching staff that is the focus of this investigation. The reasons listed for continual involvement include enjoyment, winning, achieving goals and friends.

When specifically asked to comment on their coaches, the athletes felt that their main attributes and qualities were that they were knowledgeable, communicated well, listened, were fun and funny, supportive, believed in the athlete but clearly highlighted was the importance of their coach’s personality. In comparison, the athlete’s views on an ideal coach differed, the athletes stated five specific qualities as knowledgeable, motivational, good communication, hardworking and understanding.

Over the athletes’ career, each athlete had worked with 1-13 different coaches. The majority of the athletes (50%) have had only 1 coach in their career, whilst 25% of the athletes have had between 2-5 coaches. These statistics become increasingly important when discussing the athletes thoughts regarding their favourite coach and that 58% of the athletes had their favourite coach whilst they were 14 years or older. When asked why, they stated that they were “supportive, good at explaining and they had a good personal relationship with them.” However, 14% of the athletes stated that they did not have a favourite coach. With regards to their current coach when asked whether they trusted and respected them, every athlete said that they did. They stated their positive attributes as being that they “make me work hard/pushes me, are motivational, knowledgeable, communication, passionate, understands, enthusiastic/positive attitude.”

The focus of the questionnaire then moved onto the “coach – athlete” relationship. Most athletes acknowledged that they felt they had a good relationship with their current coach, whilst two athletes said that it was OK. Most importantly every athlete stated that they ‘need’ a coach to develop and improve their skills. The fundamental and most significant findings are the athletes’ testimonies on what is most and least important to them with regards to their relationship with their coach, as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Judo athletes' (n = 36) testimonies regarding the relationship with their coach

The most important attributes of the athletes relationship with their coach	The least important attributes of the athletes relationship with their coach
Trust and respect Communication and understanding which links also with support and belief Getting on with your coach- open to talk and is there Honesty	Qualifications Judo status Belt grades Gender Age Competitive internationals

**Table 2.** A direct comparison on what is important to the judo athlete (n = 36) and to the coach (n = 2) in the dynamics of the relationship, the points are very similar.

Coaches views of important attributes	Athlete's views of important attributes
Listening Honesty Trust Believe Ability to work hard	Trust and respect Communication and understanding Getting on with your coach Honesty

### Coach

In the semi-structured interviews with the Great Britain National Women's Coaches, the coaches reflected upon their initial start into Judo, how they continued as a player and their views on themselves as coaches but ultimately their relationship with the athletes. The coaches' views on how they got into coaching differed, but they have all been coaching for almost 20 years in some form or another. Each coach gave some sort of explanation of their time as an athlete, in terms of its importance, underlying their coaching credibility.

When asked to define the key areas that they think are important to the "coach – athlete" relationship the coaches suggested that "listening is probably the most important skill," "honesty" and "trust and believe."

### Coach and athlete

This section is the most significant, not only because it is both the athlete and the coaches' view, but it is a comparison of whether the views of the "coach – athlete" relationship differ from the varying perspectives. This can be overviewed in Table 2.

One of the main disparities that can be noted is the importance that the coaches place on their experience and results as an athlete which was in direct conflict to the view of the athlete. The

athletes stated that this was the least important attribute of a coach, whereby the coaches feel the need to justify their coaching credentials by it and the experience it gave them.

## DISCUSSION

As the results are presented in three distinct sections so too will the discussion, firstly the athletes.

### Athlete

The questionnaire's results grouped into three very distinctive areas. The background of the athletes held very similar responses as to why they started their journey with judo and what might be expected as the reasons to why they continue, this could be inferred to as they are all still competing at international level and that if the athlete is engaged in sports out of enjoyment, it has been shown to have a positive effect on sport persistence and performance [18].

The similarities started to fade when discussing their current views on their coach or coaching per se. The differing in perspective from their current coach's top attributes to an ideal coach shows a clear correlation between the qualitative answers and the quantitative data collected. With more than half the group suggesting that they have already experienced their favourite coach and that due to the age that this occurred, the opinion was

maintained that their current coach was not their favourite, thus not matching to their ideal. This becomes of interest for coaching staff when trying to understand the athletes and their motivations.

The answers gathered on the athletes' perception of a "coach – athlete" relationship yielded a plethora of data, most notably the acknowledgment by every athlete that they need a coach. Antonini Philippe and Seiler [19] agreed that athletes are dependent on a coach as athletes need to learn and develop. They suggested the reason for this being that the coaches' experience is more; they were needed for motivation and belief and to see corrections and improvements needed from an outside view. Table 1 represents the attributes that the athletes give greatest weight to, the attributes that they feel should be the character traits of a coach. This becomes of great significance when discussed with the attributes selected by the coaches.

The strength and importance of the relationship was highlighted as when the athletes were asked whether they trusted and respected their current coach, 100% of them stated that they did. Trust and respect are fundamental in a successful "coach – athlete" relationship [15]. They also noted that the worst experiences of their coach was when they feel like they have let them down, not given 100%, made silly mistakes or get told off. Thus highlighting the significance and key character traits that both the coaches and athlete place on a "coach – athlete" relationship and importance that they give to it.

### Coach

The coaches' interviews followed a similar structure to that of the questionnaires, with initial questions looking into the coaches' background which all followed on from being an athlete first and what they had achieved as athletes. When questioned more specifically around their coaching, the coaches felt that had some good results:

"Obviously Gemma (Gemma Gibbons Olympic Silver 2012), but also as a coach, Junior World medal, Junior European medals, U23 medals. The only place as a coach that I have not coached a medallist is World Championships".

"I think, at junior level I was in charge of the junior team and they won three medals at the Junior Worlds and one 5<sup>th</sup> place and this was

the best result for 20 years. At U23 level, I was the coach for team that won 5 medals at the European Championships and there is no World Championships and a 5<sup>th</sup> place which is the most successful results ever at that age. And Gemma Gibbons silver at the Olympic Games, the first Olympic medallist for 12 years."

The coaches specifically noted that "I don't think coaching for me is a job" and that "I think it is more than a job." This is interesting as the coaches' feel that their role is very important, stating that "if you have got 7 girls, they trust, they put their life's dreams in my hands." One of the coaches went further to suggest that "I want to provide people with the inspiration to dream, the opportunity to deliver and the belief to achieve." Trzaskoma-Bicsérdy et al. [15] said "an effective coach creates an inspirational environment that highlights effort and improvements in which athletes are more likely to oblige positively and develop a stable background for excellence" (p. 485).

In acknowledgement to the coach's view regarding their role it is significant to try to recognise how they try and fulfil this with their actions. It was suggested that the main focus should be on the athlete, a very athlete-centred approach, recognising their individual nature. "Because Judo is an individual sport, football is different because you have to manage a team but individually for Judo everybody is different. Everybody's head is different, everybody's body, so you cannot be the same with everyone." Whereas the other coach's explained, "I think the coach should fit the athlete. So with athletes as a whole I am the same with everybody, because everybody is treated individual to them but always with the same integrity and the same values." Interestingly [20] mentioned that coaches in individual sports are more likely to understand the athlete, having more of a positive impact on the coach athlete relationship opposed to team sports where the coach assesses the team as a whole.

The coaches agreed that it was important to treat the athletes as individuals but also the coaches accepted the significance of their own behaviour, "I try and act with consistency so my behaviour with them is always the same." Whilst another coach explained it through setting boundaries for the players "in terms of a relationship that a coach has with a player you can have a laugh and a joke

but there is a line, there is a line and the player knows where the line is and if they come over this line, they know that they are in trouble.” Coaches and athletes from Olympic sports propose that a personal relationship is crucial but agree at the same time kept at ‘arm’s-length’ and have boundaries to remain professional and one step away from athlete [21]. To begin to recognise their own behaviour as significant was important to the coaches but they felt one of the most important aspects of the coaching was understanding, “as a coach you need to understand your player.” They went on further to add “how they motivate themselves, understanding how they learn, understanding how to talk to them, how to get the best from them.” A point reiterated by the other coach “so it’s about understanding the athlete, it’s about how people develop.” On the other hand many papers such as [14, 19, 22] actually suggested that the athlete needs to understand the coach and their intentions to be able accept tasks and develops.

The attention of the interviews then focussed on how the understanding was built and ultimately how they developed their “*coach – athlete*” relationship. [8, 11] went on to say that “the quality of the coach–athlete relationship is a vital determinant of athlete satisfaction and motivation, thus it is important to examine”. Most prominently noted was that the “relationship between the athlete and coach is just for you two; it is just about you two”. They suggested that “you need to recognise the role of the relationship, it is not work where you are the boss and it is not friends, it’s its own thing, it’s a special relationship. You need boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not” [15] agreed that it was a unique relationships but it was important for its effectiveness if the coach and the athlete have the same expectations this also resolves possible conflict and arguments.

To build the relationship with the athletes the coaches emphasised they are “consistently the same and I hope that will help them trust me. And then when I start to work with them I have a very very honest conversation.” They continue to suggest that “because ultimately I want to get the best out of the athlete so I need to have a relationship but the relationship cannot be too one sided it has to be even it has to be a balance. So that if they know where the line is, it’s good.” They also said that the way to achieve this was “people skills. That’s another thing with coaching

you need people skills. You need to be able to read somebody, if they are happy, if they are sad. You need to be able to talk to them, you need to be able to get information, you need to know them.” [23, p.886] concur with these points suggesting that “an individual in a position of authority (e.g. an instructor or a coach) takes the other’s (e.g. an athlete) perspective and acknowledges their feelings, this is known as autonomy support.” Cassidy [24] in the paper by Larimer and Jowett [25, p.152] agreed with the coaches’ views and comments that “coaching is the art of recognising the people and responding to the people you are working with”.

As the interview progresses it focussed more closely on the coach-athlete relationship and what, as coaches, they thought were the key important areas, with four being summarised as listening, honesty and trust and belief. Opposed to Athletes in the paper [19] who suggested that “positive essential requirements for a high-quality coach-athlete relationship are; respect, esteem, admiration, appreciation and regards.” The coaches also proposed two other aspects, one being that “I expect them to work very hard, I must show them that I also will work very hard as the coach,” so work rate and morals and values was also mentioned. As well as the process in your coaching in that “you must have very high technical and tactical levels, but then to achieve, I think you must understand the process.” This is then explained to the athlete, “so always this is where we are, this is where we want to be, and the process is this.” It was seen that this would therefore give them “confidence in next step and they have confidence in me and so as long as I have good behaviour and they respect me, then anything is possible.” One of the coaches felt the key was to help the athletes to “have the knowledge, and you understand then you can believe you can achieve.” One of the negative aspects that the coaches noted from their perspective with regards to the relationship was the difficulties of the complex nature of the athletes’ personalities and that being an elite athlete denotes that “to be really elite you must be quite selfish so if you work with selfish people at some point they will upset you. You have to accept it but it is not easy.” [22] have written that athletes with personalities of agreeableness are more likely to recognize their coach as empathic, understanding, and sensitive, thus allowing them to interact in an accommodating manner that won’t upset the

coach. This is of interest as it is slightly conflicting with the findings but can be explained as the athletes in this particular study were not all of a National standard, nor all from individual sports which could explain the difference.

The coping mechanism to the negative aspects of being a coach were revealed as the same, that of family, "do you know what, when it gets me down, my reality is going home and the family unit will just pick me up" and "my family really is everything. But the other thing is that as soon as I go home and my kids are everywhere, I don't think about the problems with Judo."

### Coach and athlete

The findings of the above two sections become hugely significant when discussed together, what each group's opinion was on the relationship but how it compares and contrasts, as both groups are the parties involved in the forming of the coach-athlete relationship and thus it would be expected that there would be some sort of consensus on the opinions. To achieve a comparable representation the three main themes of each analysis will be examined together.

Firstly the reasons discussed of how the athlete and coaches both started Judo were very similar, this is ultimately because when the coaches came to Judo they too were athletes so it seems just that this is the same. An interesting difference noted in the beginning section has to do with the reasons for continuing in the sport. Athletes do state that it is to achieve their goals and win but they also raised significant proportion to making friends and enjoyment as previously supported by [18]. Whereas the coaches' focus was on making an Olympic Champion, "so by them achieving Olympic Gold, it will satisfy my ambition. That is why I coach, that is my motivation." The coaches also noted that "Judo is almost a premium product in what it delivers, it is more than a sport" and that "I felt that it had changed people's lives." But there is still significant focus placed on the Olympics when working with the athletes and

although the athletes would like to fulfil their dreams, there is recognition from both parties of "really the same lesson that it is a journey so I think I learnt very well that it is not just about the Olympic Games."

The biggest disparity to note when comparing both parties is that the coaches fixate on their success as an athlete, whereas the athletes note that a coach's performance as an athlete is the least important attribute to them. It seems that the coaches feel the need to build their coaching success on from the results and experience as an athlete, but the athletes are only interested in what the coach can do for them now. The athletes' views of what attributes are important in their coach include "make me work hard/pushes me, are motivational, knowledgeable, communication, passionate, understands, enthusiastic/ positive attitude." The coaches noted that for them the key attribute is to treat each athlete as an individual, to build an understanding of them and to be a role model in terms of the behaviour they expect and can be expected of them, "you always have to be a role model in your behaviour. So if I expect them to work very hard, I must show them that I also will work very hard as the coach."

The coaches felt that if they achieved these points then it was possible to build a relationship with the athlete which was stated as "the thing I enjoy the most." This can then link further, as to the significance of this relationship, to the coach's notion that, coaching is more than a job, "I think judo is my life."

### CONCLUSIONS

The significant and fundamental finding was the importance of the "coach – athlete" relationship being recognised by both the athletes and the coaches, with the athletes declaring that they definitely need a coach to develop and improve. In a direct comparison on what is important to the athlete and to the coach in the dynamic of the relationship, the points are very similar.

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