

ATHLETE-COACH RELATIONSHIP IN BRAZILIAN MEN'S ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS

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Abstract

Coaches' behavior has been shown to be one of the determining factors for a positive and successful sport experience. Therefore, this research aimed to point out characteristics of the gymnast-coach relationship from the standpoint of the Brazilian men's artistic gymnastics (MAG) national team athletes (2013-2021). The qualitative-exploratory methodology was used to accomplish the research objective. The data were gleaned from semi-structured interviews with five gymnasts of the Brazilian MAG national team. Interview transcripts were analyzed and organized into three thematic units: abusive coach practices in the past; changes in coach's behavior; and positive coach-athlete relationships. It was identified that the coaches' current behavior is ethical, although athletes did not deny a history of abusive patterns. Athletes observed changes in coaches' behavior after national and international governing bodies established committees to control and fight abuse in sports. The athletes also reported a mutually respectful relationship with their coaches nowadays, and they were sorry for the under-appreciation of the coach profession in Brazil.

Keywords: Olympic games, male gymnast, coaching, elite sports.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to provide an overview of the athlete-coach relationship in the Brazilian men's artistic gymnastics (MAG) national team. It is a part of a greater project with the objective to understand the path of such athletes in this sport. Preparing elite athletes is known to be a complex phenomenon that can be analyzed from

different perspectives, including the coach-athlete interpersonal relationship (Côté & Gilbert, 2009).

Subijana, Martin, Tejón, and Côté (2021) point out that coaches' professional knowledge and behavior are determining factors for a positive sports experience. Hence, they suggest that studies focus on

understanding this relationship and its possible consequences for success. This is due to the important influence coaches have on athletes' path in sport, as this relationship impacts their self-confidence, emotions, anxiety, and performance.

Moreover, the atmosphere in the training gym is determined by this relationship, which is traditionally seen as hierarchical (coach-athlete) – especially in artistic gymnastics (AG) – and sometimes abusive (Bortoleto & Schiavon, 2016; Cervin, Kerr, Barker-Ruchti, Schubring & Nunomura, 2017; Pinheiro, Pimenta, Resende & Malcolm, 2014). Oliveira, Bortoleto, and Nunomura (2017) identified coach-athlete relationships as paradoxical in women's AG (WAG). On the one hand, coaches are close to the athletes for at least four hours a day, either helping them safely perform acrobatic movements or instructing them in training; on the other hand, they hold most power in the hierarchical relationship, conducting unilaterally their work method and curbing gymnasts' critical senses (Oliveira et al., 2017). Costa, Marques, Oliveira, and Nunomura (2020) addressed this manipulation, questioning and criticizing coaches' mental violence against gymnasts, referring to the hierarchical and unilateral coach-athlete relationship in which athletes are treated as "puppets". Although their studies focus on women, coach autocracy in hierarchical relationships is present also in men's sports categories (Bortoleto & Schiavon, 2016).

Brazilian WAG has historically been visible, particularly since Daiane dos Santos became the world champion in 2003 and Rebeca Andrade won two Olympic medals at the Tokyo 2020 (2021) Summer Olympic Games. However, it was the Brazilian MAG who won the first Olympic medal at London

Olympic in 2012 Games. Up to now, Brazilian male gymnasts have won four medals, that is, gold and silver, by Arthur Zanetti (2012-2016); silver, by Diego Hypólito (2016); and bronze, by Arthur Nory (2016).

Since the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is a determining factor in achieving sports results (Oliveira et al., 2017; Subijana et al., 2021) and there are fewer academic papers exclusively on the issue of men's gymnastics (Vargas, Reis, Leite & Capraro, 2021), the objective of this article is to point out characteristics of the gymnast-coache relationship from the standpoint of athletes of the Brazilian MAG national team (2013-2021).

METHODS

The issues that occur in the gym training context may be better described by athletes themselves due to their peculiarities (Oliveira, 2016). Hence, the qualitative-exploratory methodology (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) was used to reach the said objective by interviewing five gymnasts of the Brazilian MAG national team. The criteria adopted for the selection of participants were as follows: a) having been a member of the Brazilian MAG national team; b) having participated in World Championships and/or Olympic Games between 2013 and 2021, and c) currently an active gymnast (not retired). Athletes who declined to participate in the survey were excluded from the study. Therefore, five gymnasts from the Brazilian national team who were active during the same period participated in the survey, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Information about interviewed gymnasts.

Athlete	Start sporting career	Debut in World Championships
Gymnast 1	2004	2013
Gymnast 2	1997	2009
Gymnast 3	1996	2014
Gymnast 4	1997	2010
Gymnast 5	2002	2014

Legend: MAG: men's artistic gymnastics.

Source: The authors, based on the International Gymnastics Federation.

The athletes were contacted through the Brazilian Gymnastics Federation (CBG, in Portuguese), and they were informed about the research objectives, including ethical issues. It's important to mention that this research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Brasilia, protocol number: 3.896.312.

Data collection occurred at two different moments. Gymnast 1, Gymnast 2, and Gymnast 4 were interviewed at the Olympic Training Centre, in Rio de Janeiro, in July 2019. The other two athletes were individually interviewed via videoconferencing in May 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As expected in the semi-structured interviews process, a script was developed with central themes focusing on the gymnasts' history as athletes. Social aspects that had an impact on their careers in gymnastics (including the coach-athlete relationship) were addressed. The questions were guided to allow athletes to narrate their experiences from the beginning to the high level. When necessary, the funnel technique (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) was used – i.e., asking additional questions to find further information on the topic.

The interviews were transcribed and minor adjustments were made to correct

the language without changing the meaning and the speech content. The transcripts were assessed by a research group who helped to interpret the data and define thematic units (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis produced the following three units: abusive coaching practices in the past; changes in coaches' behavior; positive coach-athlete relationships. These thematic units are presented and discussed in the next section

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Abusive coach practices in the past

Oliveira et al. (2017) highlight that, in the AG microculture (Oliveira, 2014), gymnasts are aware of the importance of a positive relationship with the coach. It is a partnership that while close, given the constant physical contact and the long training hours, is also distant due to the hierarchy in the gym context (Oliveira, 2016).

Despite social stratification in the gym, Weiss (2000) mentions that sports mentors and gymnasts have an interdependent relationship, an unspoken pact, as athletes depend on the coaches' instructions while the coaches' reputation/career depends on the athletes. Oliveira (2014) points out that AG athletes are not always aware of this

interdependent relationship, especially since many coaches prefer the idea of dependence. Thus, gymnasts are taught from their earliest years in this discipline to fully respect their coaches and trust their knowledge and prospective capacity without questioning.

Renowned Russian coach Leonid Arkaev reflects that success depends on the relationship characterized by mutual dedication and loyalty (Arkaev, 2000). Coakley (2001) points out that in these relationships coaches are usually allowed to exceed the limits of socially acceptable behavior to encourage and train athletes in the effort to surpass their opponents. According to the author, “athletes are expected to obey coaches and show that they are willing to make sacrifices in their quest for success” (p. 490).

AG is a sport known for its exhaustive training and strict coaches (Kerr, Barker-Ruchti, Schubring, Cervin & Nunomura., 2019). Ryan (1995) analyzed the women’s category and considered that gymnasts get used to doing their part without questioning, as coaches demand subservience. Hence, when a coach yells or makes aggressive comments beyond constructive corrections, gymnasts only listen and obey (Oliveira et al., 2017).

Tofler, Stryer, Micheli and Herman (1996) found authoritarian behaviors and demands in gymnasts’ reports, culminating in outbreaks of crying strikingly present in training sessions. Likewise, Duarte, Carbinatto, and Nunomura (2015) suggest that coaches’ reactions are one of the causes of emotional disturbances in Brazilian WAG athletes.

Reports are not different in MAG. Olympic medalist and first Brazilian world champion Diego Hypólito states in his autobiographical book that he had been a

victim of psychological harassment during his sports career. In his book, Diego Hypólito also mentions physical punishments that took place backstage at competitions. According to him, it was conducted by older gymnasts, but the coaches knew and condoned such behavior.

The report by two-time world champion Diego Hypólito provides a glimmer of behavioral microculture in gymnastics, also pointed out by Oliveira (2016). Regarding values, Oliveira (2014) highlights gymnasts’ perseverance, discipline, dedication, and submission to their coaches. As to behaviors, he confirms that athletes feel obliged to accept and withstand the pain and sacrifice. Even though Oliveira (2016) discovered that coaches were technically effective in conducting AG training sessions, they often have poor interpersonal skills which lead to a poor-quality coach-athlete relationship, as pain and fear seem to be a part of the training environment. This situation can be identified in the statement by Gymnast 2’s coach on his official webpage: “*I made him (i.e., Gymnast 2) cry every day*”. When Gymnast 2 was asked about this, he only said: “*Well... it has changed a lot.*”

Athletes often describe the training environment as intimidating, and they end up considering their coaches’ abusive attitudes normal (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Diehl et al., 2014; Oliveira, 2016; Pinheiro et al., 2014). Many times, athletes do not realize they are in abusive situations due to an acculturation process, which begins at an early age and extends throughout their careers (Oliveira, 2016). Thus, according to Oliveira (2016), people in the gym where coach autocracy rules, see attitudes, such as denying attention, yelling, and being ironic and aggressive, as normal and even necessary.

Diehl et al. (2014) established that young German Olympic athletes often feel under pressure from their coaches – something like “this is the only way to get there”, which somehow legitimizes abusive behavior. In other words, athletes seem to accept that if the coach does not have an extreme attitude, training will produce no results. Gymnast 4 said he had such experiences and explained: *“Things have changed, gradually changed; the knowledge... coaches nowadays have a different knowledge from what they used to have before. Now [this type of abusive training] does not work anymore. But in the beginning, coaches were violent, ... they (gymnasts) would suffer, cry... But as the years passed, they (coaches) realized that those attitudes were not the only way to motivate athletes for hard work in gymnastics. So, things began to change, the laws changed, some things changed, the mindset, the knowledge.”* (Gymnast 4).

The gymnast's statements point to an important discussion about the different factors that can contribute, or not, to athlete's motivation. In this regard, previous studies indicate that the most important factor in sports motivation is achieving sporting success (Tusak et al., 2022). Athletes are aware that they need to strive and work hard to progress in their chosen sport. Furthermore, external factors, such as the training environment and interpersonal relationships, including the relationship with the coach, can also affect motivation (Tusak et al., 2022). Therefore, education on coping strategies and resources may aid coaches' abilities to motivate their athletes in a positive way while pursuing sporting success, particularly by better managing their frustration and anxiety in stressful situations.

Changes in the coaches' behavior

The changes in the coaches' behavior mentioned by the athletes who participated in this research were motivated by complaints of abuse in the gymnastics team of the United States, which triggered worldwide complaints. Fisher and Anders (2020) emphasize that the case of physician Larry Nassar made a big impact in societies around the world, especially since it was a serious complaint of sexual abuse. However, the authors also highlight the importance of identifying emotional abuse, which they say is very common in sports and oftentimes overlooked. According to Oliveira (2016), “there is a consensus that even overwhelming situations that would be seen as physical or psychological abuse outside the gym are necessary to excel” (p. 154). This occurs because gymnasts and coaches are immersed in a context with specific cultural norms, which are ingrained but not perceived or talked about (Weiss, 2000). We agree with Coakley (2001) that sport context encourages people to overcome the limits of their bodies, as success can only be achieved by hard work, but this can get out of control. Oliveira (2016) adds that cultural issues in AG and the difficulty to identify the fine line between abusive and positive coaching behavior inside the gym are the key. This microculture is anchored in military heritage, out of which this gymnastic discipline was borne, with its hierarchical order, discipline, methods, mentality, and civil utility. Gymnasts are submitted to a sports training process that is guided by these military characteristics, permeated by the sense of duty and honor and the need to persevere and withstand the necessary hard work – all of this backed by coach-centered power and usually empirical, orally transmitted knowledge (Barker-Ruchti,

2011; Oliveira, 2014; Bortoleto & Schiavon, 2016).

After the Larry Nassar scandal in the United States of America, the highest sport governing bodies, FIG in particular, developed strategies 22 2002. To this end, the entity considers good practices in different disciplines and provides a review and analysis of the world literature on the science of sport. Hence, the specific MAG document reinforces the need for coaches to observe the nuances of each developmental phase and provide the necessary care to prevent physical, emotional, and psychological damage (Fink & Hofmann, 2015). In other words, the impact of regulating entities to bring about significant changes in sport was once again demonstrated, as pointed out by Bortoleto and Schiavon (2016).

Almost as a counterpoint, the athletes who participated in this research showed some concern with what they called excessive preventive measures. One of the athletes ponders about the new generation of gymnasts: *“Nowadays, everything causes trouble! You can’t speak a little louder, call their attention [...] to educate, to set rules”*. (Gymnast 2). In this regard, another athlete comments on present-day training: *“It is still heavy. But not as it used to be, not as before. We even play so that these new kids do not suffer like we did.”* (Gymnast 4). He sees it as a potential problem for the future of the MAG national team because many athletes do not persevere: *“Now if we are a little tougher and push it further, the kid says, ‘I don’t want it anymore’; and now we have gyms, money, structure.”* (Gymnast 4).

To a certain extent, the words of the Brazilian MAG national team gymnasts indicate that coaches have significantly changed the way they treat athletes.

However, it is still believed that being tough and strict is necessary to achieve good results. These changes have occurred mostly because of the coping measures, as reinforced in this statement: *“Some coaches, when they need to be tougher, they go ‘like’ [hand gesture] to hold back, because it could mean trouble, you know”* (Gymnast 1). In this respect, Denison, Jones, and Mills (2019) question the current excessive regulation that coaches have to apply worldwide. In the authors’ opinion, over-regulated and controlled training may have a negative effect on long-term preparation for the sport.

Preventive measures, adopted both by national and international organizations, are linked to some changes in various sectors of Western society. These changes can be justified by an increased dissemination of social discourses that constitute political correctness, as well as their implementation through laws that protect children and adolescents from abuse in various spheres. In addition, the current accessibility of audio and video capturing tools, as well as the speed of dissemination, facilitate the detection and reporting of these situations (Souza & Capraro, 2022).

Positive coach-athlete relationships

Positive coach-athlete relationships should also be pointed out. Gymnast 3 got emotional when talking about his coach: *“Well, I have been on the road with my coach for a while. It has been a long time, and I believe it is essential because now he knows me very well. He knows the days when I am bad, when I am well, when I will be able to make it, when I will not; I am very stubborn in some aspects. When I am making too many mistakes, I repeat it over and over and over again, even if I keep failing; and he knows when to say: ‘Look,*

take it easy. That is enough for now; let us try another apparatus...'. Or: 'Let us finish for today'. Because he knows I may get injured because I am focused on my mistakes, and he knows when to encourage me, and when to slow me down. I believe this synchrony between the coach and the athlete is essential." (Gymnast 3).

A positive coach-athlete relationship is crucial to developing gymnasts and keeping them in the elite (Costa et al., 2020; Kerr et al., 2019; Nunomura et al., 2012). In this sense, Barker-Ruchti and Schubrig (2016) reiterate that coaches should have a trusting relationship with their athletes. Therefore, they claim that good communication with both the athletes and their families, flexibility regarding training workload, and constant motivation assessments are essential. They can be effective even in athlete's physical rehabilitation following an injury (Maurice, Voelker, Kuklick & Byrd, 2021).

Although some athletes changed clubs and coaches along their path, they have been careful to maintain a good relationship with previous coaches, as pointed out by Gymnast 5: *"I was in the same club for ten years, but I realized I really needed to change, my mind needed it, you know? You need to change! So, I looked for another club [...]. I had already known the coach of my current club for a long time from competitions. I always saw him, talked to him, and liked his work. So, I got in touch with him, and it was really my decision to change clubs. I talked to him, then I had to talk with my coach at that time, right? Explain things well, what happened."* (Gymnast 5).

Further, in a positive relationship with coaches, the athletes were concerned with showing appreciation to them, as observed in these words: *"There is a need for more*

investment, especially in coaches" (Gymnast 2). Other interviewed gymnasts confirm the need for specific preparation to work as a coach in MAG and the coaches' low wages. The 2016 Olympic finalist explained: *"The problem is: there is no one to teach the kids [young gymnasts], because physical education teachers finish college with very basic knowledge about gymnastics. They are not ready to get here [elite] straight from college... you know? Bu, we can't blame the university structure and such, because physical education teachers will not build their careers there [in AG]. And, about the low income: They will not get enough money to feed their family. They will spend the whole day in the gym and will not get enough money to support their family. So, I believe investing in teachers would help the discipline."* (Gymnast 4).

This financial issue had already been reported by Vargas and Capraro (2020) who established that Brazilian gymnasts share part of the resources they are granted from the Athlete Allowance Program (Programa Bolsa-Atleta, in Portuguese) with their coaches. According to the interviewees, the coaches' income is often insufficient to pay for their regular expenses. Gymnast 1 considers the coaches' low income as one of the reasons why MAG has not spread out in other Brazilian cities beyond the axis of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. He explains: *"There are many professionals here [in Rio de Janeiro], but everything is in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. They do not go to Aracaju [a city in north-eastern Brazil] to offer gymnastics training, they do not go to Fortaleza [a city in north-eastern Brazil], where the sports structure is huge but abandoned! How can you take someone from here to there for nothing?"* (Gymnast 1).

Also concerning the financial compensation for the coaches' work, Gymnast 3 stated: "*I did not get here on my own, you know. I am only the last part. I am just the icing on the cake when we get to the competition, because before that there is my coach and the multidisciplinary team.*". Nunomura and Oliveira (2014) highlight that gymnasts depend greatly on their coaches, who play a determining role by bring their experiences, knowledge, and effort to the table. Arkaev (2000) reflects, based on the thoughts of Russian coach Boris Pilkin, that coaches are the roots, who are not seen in competitions, because only gymnasts (the flowers) appear. In other words, "gymnasts grow, develop, and flourish to show to the world their qualities, while coaches nourish their athletes' talent and provide them with stability" (Nunomura & Oliveira, 2014, p. 67).

Regarding multidisciplinary teams, Bortoleto and Schiavon (2016) explain that only recently, Brazilian athletes have obtained the support of physicians, physiotherapists, nutritionists, psychologists, and fitness coach. And only few clubs have this multidisciplinary approach, specifically those working in better financial conditions. Nonetheless, it has proved to be essential to improve results in competitions.

Lastly, the analysis of the MAG coach-athlete relationship corroborates the study by Denison et al. (2019). Moreover, interpersonal relationships are permeated with specific issues, which belong to the culture and memory of each one of those involved. Thus, it is still very common to hear sports people emphasize the need for suffering in training and rough and strict coaches. This was likewise pointed out by Olympic champion Nadia Comaneci, trained by Romanian Béla Károlyi, who

was known for achieving excellent sports results at the cost of cruel training that made emotional abuse natural in AG (Vargas et al., 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

The investigation of coach-athlete relationships, based on the narrative of Brazilian MAG national team gymnasts, found that athletes do not deny their coaches' psychological abuse in the past. However, they emphasise that the coaches' behavior changed and currently is ethical. Moreover, they are concerned about the new generation's performance, due to the new standards imposed by various authorities. The exchange of knowledge with foreign coaches proved to be positive and contributed to the changes in coaches' behavior, which is different from what the literature claims regarding WAG. Also, the athletes in our study reported a respectful relationship with their coaches and are sorry for the low appreciation of the coach's profession in the country.

The literature on interpersonal coach-gymnast relationships constantly points to situations of sexual and emotional abuse. And, specifically in Brazilian MAG, the scandal involving one of the 2016 national team coaches and the complaints made by Diego Hypólito put this gymnastic discipline in the spotlight. Nevertheless, the interviewees in this research did not report such issues.

Concerning psychological abuse, changes in the coaches' behavior were verified after committees were established to control and fight abuse in various sports governing bodies. However, it is important to remember that such changes are taking place in all sectors of Western society

which to some extent indicates a change in global culture.

Lastly, athletes must be empowered so that they can identify abusive behaviors and take initiatives leading to changes. Also, continuous education measures for coaches must be taken, thus supporting good practices and curbing inadequate behavior.

Successful paths in sports, such as the ones presented here, are interesting sources for identifying factors that help comprehensively develop elite athletes. Nevertheless, this study was limited to observing the coach-athlete relationship from the gymnasts' standpoint. Hence, future studies should also address the views of coaches, judges, and families from different countries and generations of athletes.

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