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EMBRACING EXCELLENCE:

Cultivating Success Through Positive Sport

This report was produced for the CAC based
on the dissertation of Erin Willson, PhD.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Gretchen Kerr, PhD is a Professor and Dean in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on understanding and preventing athletes' experiences of gender-based violence and maltreatment in sport. Gretchen was a co-author of Canada's first national prevalence study of maltreatment among current and former national team members and was the subject matter expert in the development of the *Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment*, a policy mandated for all National Sport Organizations by Sport Canada. As a public scholar, Gretchen applies her research experience and expertise to promote safe, healthy, and fulfilling sport experiences for all.

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Thank you to all the athletes for your contributions. You have contributed as National Team members, winning medals for Canada at the highest level, and have devoted your efforts to advocating for a better sport environment for all of us.

Thank you to each coach who shared their perspectives. Each conversation through this study was truly inspiring and motivating. It was an honour to learn from each of you. We hope the kindness, care, and love you demonstrated for your sports and for each of your athletes can be echoed by coaches around the world. You have reminded us all that sport is about more than just medals, even when you are at the top. Thank you for all the work you do, your athletes are lucky to be coached by you.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Safe sport continues to be a top priority in Canadian sport with the former Minister of Sport referring to sport as being “a crisis.” Consistent with international prevalence studies, Canadian data indicate that psychological abuse and neglect are the most frequently reported types of maltreatment. The high rates of these forms of maltreatment are often attributed to the normalization of these behaviours, the belief that these behaviours enhance performance outcomes, and that they reflect a win-at-all-cost mentality.

To counter these behaviours, positive coaching styles like autonomy-supportive and athlete-centred coaching have been proposed. Although positive coaching can increase athlete satisfaction and retention, the connections between these approaches and high-performance outcomes have yet to be demonstrated. Until positive coaching styles are shown to increase performance success, coaches will be reluctant to adopt these styles, especially when their job security depends upon the performance success of their athletes or teams. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand how international medals can be achieved with a positive sport experience. Second, we sought to explore the characteristics of a positive sport experience that produce performance (e.g., behaviours, environment, coaching techniques).

Interviews were conducted with 13 Olympic and Paralympic athletes, who had won at least one medal at an Olympic/Paralympic Games, World Championships, or Pan American Games, and 11 Olympic and Paralympic coaches of international medalists. Participants were purposefully selected for their medal success in a positive coaching environment.

Results indicated that medals can be won at the international stage in environments that support holistic well-being. There were also additional benefits to a positive environment, including perceived increases in performance, performance satisfaction, ease of training, resiliency, enjoyment, and longevity in sport. These benefits create a cyclical effect that further increases performance. In contrast, the participants who had previously been in negative sport environments or environments that only prioritized performance reported decreased performance, motivation, and well-being. Even when medal attainment was achieved in negative environments, participants specifically noted that performance attainment wasn't worth the negative outcomes; as such, many participants refused to stay in environments that embraced a win-at-all-cost mentality.

Four interacting attributes of a positive sport environment were discussed by the 24 coaches and athletes who were interviewed. The attributes included the disposition of the athlete, coach, coach-athlete relationship and the training environment.

Autonomy-supportive coaching provides athletes with choices, rationales for tasks, integrates athletes' perspectives, and encourages athletes to act independently.¹

Athlete-centred coaching places athletes at the centre of their experience. Athletes are encouraged to take ownership of their learning through opportunities to make decisions and practice leadership.²

Finally, one of the most remarkable findings from this study was that the participants' definition of success extended beyond medal performance. As such, a new definition of success is proposed that incorporates 5 elements of a successful sport experience:

1. Personal performance metrics



2. Personal development



3. Well-being



4. Enjoyment



5. A desire to stay in sport



In conclusion, this study provides evidence that athletes can succeed in positive sport environments. This is important because it combats predominant beliefs that coaches need to use abusive tactics, like yelling, belittling, and forcing the submission of athletes to achieve performance results. Findings from the high-performance athletes and coaches in this study indicate a preference for more positive sport environments, which can contribute to performance success and personal development.

This report, which is informed by the findings of Erin Willson's doctoral dissertation, was developed for the Coaching Association of Canada. The purpose of this report is to raise awareness of coaches and athletes about how success is thought of, and the contributors to performance success, personal development, and fulfillment in and through sport. We hope that this report encourages all sport participants to contemplate/consider their definitions of success in sport and the best ways to achieve this success.

INTRODUCTION

Athlete maltreatment in sport has become a growing concern in research and practice. Following an outpouring of reports of abuse by Canadian athletes, the Canadian Minister responsible for Sport in 2022, the Honourable Pascale St-Onge, declared sport to be “in crisis”³. Maltreatment in sport is an umbrella term for “all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power”⁴. As such, maltreatment includes sexual, emotional, or physical abuse, neglect, harassment, discrimination, bullying, and hazing.

In 2019, a climate survey of 995 current and recently retired Canadian National Team athletes revealed that 75% of athletes experienced at least one form of harm in their career⁵. Neglect and emotional abuse were the most frequently reported, with 68.8% and 60.2% of athletes reporting experiencing at least one harmful behaviour, respectively, whereas sexual harm was reported by 20% of athletes and physical harm was reported by 14.3% of athletes⁵. Prevalence studies conducted in more than 8 countries replicate the findings that the most commonly reported form of athlete maltreatment is psychological in nature^{6,7,8}.

Examples of psychological abuse include being shouted at in an angry or critical manner, being put down, embarrassed, or humiliated, being intentionally ignored in response to poor performance, and being criticized as a person for subpar performance⁹. In those studies that include measures of neglect, neglect is reported at higher rates than either sexual or physical harms. Behaviours of neglect include training and/or competing in unsafe conditions, or failure to provide for physical or psychological needs¹⁰.

Despite these research findings, sexual violence in sport has garnered the most media attention and has been the first line of defense for prevention initiatives. Perhaps the focus on sexual harms can be attributed to the illegal nature of these behaviours, coupled with high profile cases like those in USA Gymnastics and Alpine Canada.

Additionally, researchers have demonstrated that all types of harm (sexual, physical, emotional abuse, and neglect) can be associated with serious consequences such as decreased well-being and increased eating disorders and self-harm^{11,12}. Psychological abuse in particular, can also result in mental health challenges such as negative mood, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide ideation, and can contribute to decreased enjoyment, sport performance, and a desire to leave sport^{13,14}. Some of the reasons that psychological abuse continues to exist in sport is because the associated behaviours are considered normal or performance-enhancing. There are prevailing beliefs that fear and anger can motivate athletes and that yelling, screaming, and placing additional stress on athletes can build ‘mental toughness.’¹⁵ Additionally, critics have identified the “win-at-all-costs” mentality that characterizes the culture of sport in Canada as a risk factor for athlete maltreatment. This “win-at-all-costs” mentality is reinforced by our funding system which prioritizes the funding of athletes and teams with medal potential and attainment¹⁶. As a result, assumptions have emerged that positive coaching styles that promote happy, healthy athletes are mutually exclusive from winning; in this way, popular views hold that having both simultaneously are not possible¹⁷. In response to the crisis that characterizes sport currently, calls have been made to balance the pursuit of performance with athlete wellness and development.

While many researchers and practitioners have called for positive coaching styles, like autonomy-supportive and athlete-centred coaching, as alternatives to abusive coaching styles, these approaches have not gained traction in practice. Although evidence exists to show that positive coaching approaches are linked with increased athlete satisfaction and retention, to-date, they have not been linked with performance outcomes^{1,18}. As such, there is a lack of evidence to show that positive coaching techniques can elicit high-performance results. This study addressed this gap.

KEY FINDINGS

- Athlete maltreatment is a widespread and significant problem.
- Athlete maltreatment has significant negative consequences for athlete health and well-being, development and performance, and for the integrity of sport.
- The most common forms of maltreatment are linked with assumptions about talent development.
- Although many positive approaches to sport have been proposed, to-date they have not been linked to performance outcomes. Given the focus on performance outcomes in the Canadian high performance sport system, positive coaching approaches are less likely to be adopted without evidence that these are linked with performance.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Purpose

This study asked the question:

IS IT POSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE HIGH-PERFORMANCE RESULTS IN A POSITIVE SPORT ENVIRONMENT?

Research Questions

There were four specific research questions to explore the overarching purpose:

1. Can high-performance sport occur in positive coaching environments?
2. What behaviours do coaches use to promote performance and well-being?
3. How do coaches establish a positive coach-athlete relationship?
4. How do coaches set up an environment conducive to performance and well-being?

Methods: How Was This Study Conducted?

- Interviews were conducted with elite athletes and coaches who had obtained a medal at an international sport event (Olympics, Paralympics, World Championships, Pan American Games) and trained in a positive sport environment.
- Interviews lasted between 45–90 minutes
- Participants were asked to share their accomplishments in sport, and what they believed contributed to their success. Athletes were then asked about their relationship with their coach and to describe their coaches' techniques and communication styles. Similarly, coaches were asked about their relationships with their athletes, and how they would describe their coaching style and communication styles. Specific questions were asked relating to athlete-centered and autonomy-supportive coaching styles.

Some examples of these questions are:

- "What ways do you/your coach develop life skills?"
- "What ways are athletes involved in decision-making?"
- "How do you encourage athletes to work harder when they are tired/injured?"
- "How do coaches react to poor performance?"

Who Participated?

13 Olympic and Paralympic Athletes (10 women and 3 men)

11 Olympic and Paralympic Coaches (3 women and 8 men)

- To be eligible for this study athletes must have won at least one medal at the Olympics, World Championship, or Pan-American Games and coaches must have coached an athlete who had won a medal in one of those events.
- 13 Olympic and Paralympic athletes (10 women and 3 men) and 11 Olympic and Paralympic coaches (3 women and 8 men).
- In total, 18 sports were represented, including team and individual sports.
- As a collective, athletes competed in 23 Olympic and Paralympic games, and the medal count between participants is six gold, one silver, and seven bronze.
- The athletes had a total of 37 medals at the World Championships, including 11 gold, eight silver, and 18 bronze.
- There were also 27 medals won by the athletes at the Pan American Games, with 18 gold, four silver, and five bronze medals.
- To protect the anonymity of participants, each was asked to choose, or was assigned, a pseudonym (nickname).

Results: What Did the Athletes and Coaches Say?

There were three main themes that coaches and athletes highlighted:

1. It is possible to achieve high-performance results in a positive sport environment AND there are many other benefits from this approach.
2. A positive sport experience includes the characteristics of the individuals involved (both athlete and coach), the interpersonal relationship of the coach-and athlete, and the overarching environment that is created
3. Success should not be measured exclusively by medal count. While each participant had remarkable performance success, true success was defined by participants as (i) personal performance excellence, (ii) personal development (iii) well-being, (iiv) athlete satisfaction, and (v) career longevity. True success in sport cannot be achieved if any of these aspects are missing.

ACHIEVING INTERNATIONAL MEDALS THROUGH A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT IS POSSIBLE

Participants described the influence of a positive sport environment on international medal attainment.

"This isn't a theory of like, 'well, if you treat people better, then they will do better.' No, it's actually tangible. We have evidence. I have a gold medal upstairs that shows you it can happen. So, let's get with the program and stop traumatizing athletes."
— Andy, Olympic Champion

"But I think [my coach] kind of shaped the sport, and I learned that you can do it in a safe way. You can do it in a fun way... And it is being done, you know, in a healthy way, and that's the path we need to move forward in – a healthier, safer way."
— Lucy, World Championship Medalist

"I don't know how much better I can explain it except that I've seen it over and over and over again. When athletes are in a good spot and happy, when they have a good support team around them, their mental wellness is in check... Man, their training is better, they get more out of it. I see a rhythm to the training and a flow to performance it's just much better."
— Coach Brock

"You do a better job when you feel valued, it's simple. If a coach isn't helping an athlete feel valued, they may be getting results despite of it, but why would you do that? It's much harder, so much harder."
— Coach Elaine

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

Improved Competition Performance –
“I need to be happy to perform well”

“I need to be happy to perform well, I need a positive environment. When you have someone that cares about how I do and how I perform it’s really helped me and gives you that fuzzy feeling inside.”

— Cassandra, Olympic Medalist

“[my coach] believes a lot in the person and he wants us to be well-rounded happy people, and he thinks that happy people go fast.”

— Lilly, Olympic Champion

Easier to Train –
“It was so easy to work until you’re exhausted”

“I can’t tell you how easy it is to train to the point of exhaustion when you don’t have to worry about the emotional weight of having someone scream at you, tell you to sit down, shut up and do as your told, giving you exercise as punishment, it was so easy to just work until you’re exhausted and train hard when you don’t have to worry about treading on thin ice with an abusive coach.”

— Andy, Olympic Champion

Increased Resiliency –
“Resiliency comes from building your athletes up”

“I disagree with how you make someone tough; resiliency comes from building up your athletes, not breaking them down.”— Coach Lawrence

“It makes me more resilient mentally to handle setbacks. When you’re already in a more positive frame of mind and things happen it seems more manageable...”

— Andy, Olympic Champion

Increased Enjoyment –
“I actually enjoyed that”

“It’s high-level sport, it’s going to be hard, there are going to be shitty days, but at the end of the day you want to look back and be like, ‘No I actually did enjoy that, I got up and went there every day, I had my goals and this passion that was fueling me. I enjoyed the experience. I wasn’t just so fatigued that I was just burnt out. I was able to eat because they were not restricting me... It’s just so important to find those positive movements and the fun and joy along the way of the process, or else it’s going to get to a point where it’s just not worth it... And just to be able to allow for these friendships, and create memories, and success, and I think that was due to the environment we were in and why we love the sport.”

— Lucy, World Championship Medalist

Longevity of Sport Career –
“We can’t be throwing our eggs
against the wall and hoping
they don’t break”

“If you look at the sustainability of the program, it’s not great. Athlete turnover is not great. We are in a country that has less population than the state of California. We can’t be throwing our eggs against the wall and hoping they don’t break. We need to polish and support our eggs, because we just don’t have the population.”
— Coach Brock

“We have a whole crew of athletes that wanted to stay around who were comfortable enough to stay in the sport. They weren’t injured or broken so much that they had to retire when they were 16 or 17... I think having athletes stay around longer and have longer careers is really helpful for continued performance in Canada.”
— Coach Daniel

IN CONTRAST... A PERFORMANCE-ONLY APPROACH DECREASES PERFORMANCE

There was an overwhelming consensus amongst participants that **a performance-focused approach was not effective in attaining medal success**. Athlete Andrew (Olympic Champion) summarized “It’s a recipe for disaster.”

“What kills me is that I can’t imagine being expected to have success and be miserable every day and dread my senior coach and not be in a healthy environment. So I don’t know why or how that’s expected, how you’re expected to be successful if you’re miserable every day doing what you do. And I know that’s the case for a lot of people, and that’s devastating because sport is and can be such an amazing thing.”

— Jesse, Olympic Champion

“When I know that every single mistake I make, or every single error, or not-perfect technique is going to be picked apart it’s mentally exhausting to the point that it makes me put up this wall and I don’t even want to listen to my coach... When it’s non-stop, I get my back up and just stop listening at some point, and that’s just not a productive day.”

— Rachel, World Champion

OTHER NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF A PERFORMANCE-FIRST APPROACH

Participants also discussed several other negative impacts of negative (or abusive) coaching styles, including decreased mental health and subsequent performance decline, decreased motivation, and a desire to leave sport.

Decreased Mental Health & Performance –
“It left a lot of emotional scar tissue”

“I was broken, I was so broken. I was driven by anger and hatred of this man. I hated not just what he was making us do, but there was also a disregard for our safety; there was a disregard for our physical well-being and that went to the point of ethics violations. I hated what he was doing to my teammates, I hated that I was having to swallow that. I hated that I had to choose between going to the Olympics and my moral compass. And that was awful... I would come home and cry and then 30 minutes later turn back and do it again. I found it really hard to believe in myself and started to believe all the things he was telling me were true about myself... it left a lot of emotional scar tissue.”

— Andy, Olympic Champion

Decreased Motivation –
“You’re going to give up easier”

“If you were to go to the gym and do a really heavy lift and you walked in exhausted and tired and down, and someone’s just told you, screamed at you, ‘that you’re a club [athlete] and you’re never going to make it,’ which I’ve experienced, you’re not going to lift the hardest, you’re going to give up easier, you’re going to be dejected.”

— Andy, Olympic Champion

Dropping out of Sport –
“I don’t squeeze a lemon until there’s nothing left. It’s not sustainable.”

“When someone is trying to achieve excellence or push their personal boundaries, but seriously, is the only way to do that to run people down? I don’t squeeze a lemon until there’s nothing left. It’s not sustainable.”

— Coach Eric

Coaches and athletes were also adamant that performance wasn’t worth the outcomes if negative impacts existed:

“At what point is the medal worth it? I think that’s what a lot of people need to ask themselves?”

— Casey, Olympic Medalist

“At the end of the day to me, it’s not worth it. It’s a personal belief that it is not worth it to be involved in sport at all costs. Because then, when you’re finished sport, you have nothing to go back into, and your life satisfaction, enjoyment is no longer there. So then what’s the point?”

— Coach Elaine

KEY FINDINGS

- A positive sport experience leads to performance success AND many other benefits including increased mental health, positive affect, and motivation
- These benefits further increase performance success
- Negative coaching styles decrease performance, mental health, and motivation.
- A positive coaching approach is a more effective method of coaching

A CALL FOR CHANGE

"But it's not life and death, you can take some risks and do something different"

Overall, participants urged other coaches to adopt more positive coaching styles:

"It's an incredibly large change to do things this way, and not the way that is a command-and-control way we were all taught to use because someone used organizational behaviour theory that came from the military... so you learn how to treat everybody as if they're a soldier, as if you have to convince them that they are going to live and die for you. But it's not life and death, you can take some risks and do something different."

— Coach Henry

"... tell me that the old school yelling at people is the best way. It's not. Just because it worked for the old Dallas Cowboys doesn't mean it's going to work now."

— Coach Lawrence

"I would look at [coaches who use intimidation to motivate athletes] and say 'So you're telling me you only have one tool to motivate? You're telling me that you have nothing else in your tool belt? You've been coaching this long and that's your only tool?' And yelling and fear can work, we know that really short term, until the athlete is in a corner in a ball, uninspired, fearful of this situation. That to me, that's a sad situation."

— Coach Brock

"... and you know being mad and mean and all these things I did as a young coach maybe made athletes 10% better, but is it really worth it? Is it really worth the trauma you create on this athlete or person afterward? I'm sure my athletes would say I still demand a lot, I expect a lot of discipline, but I have boundaries I will no longer cross."

— Coach Camila

"And whatever their goals are, like if you were a co-worker and your company is trying to attain some type of goal, and as a boss, you can't just berate your employees and make them work all the time and have terrible conditions and do whatever because that's the goal of the company or whatever? The rules that are in workplaces and in schools and in the rest of society, they have got to apply to sport as well. This is not something that is apart from the rest of the world."

— Coach Daniel

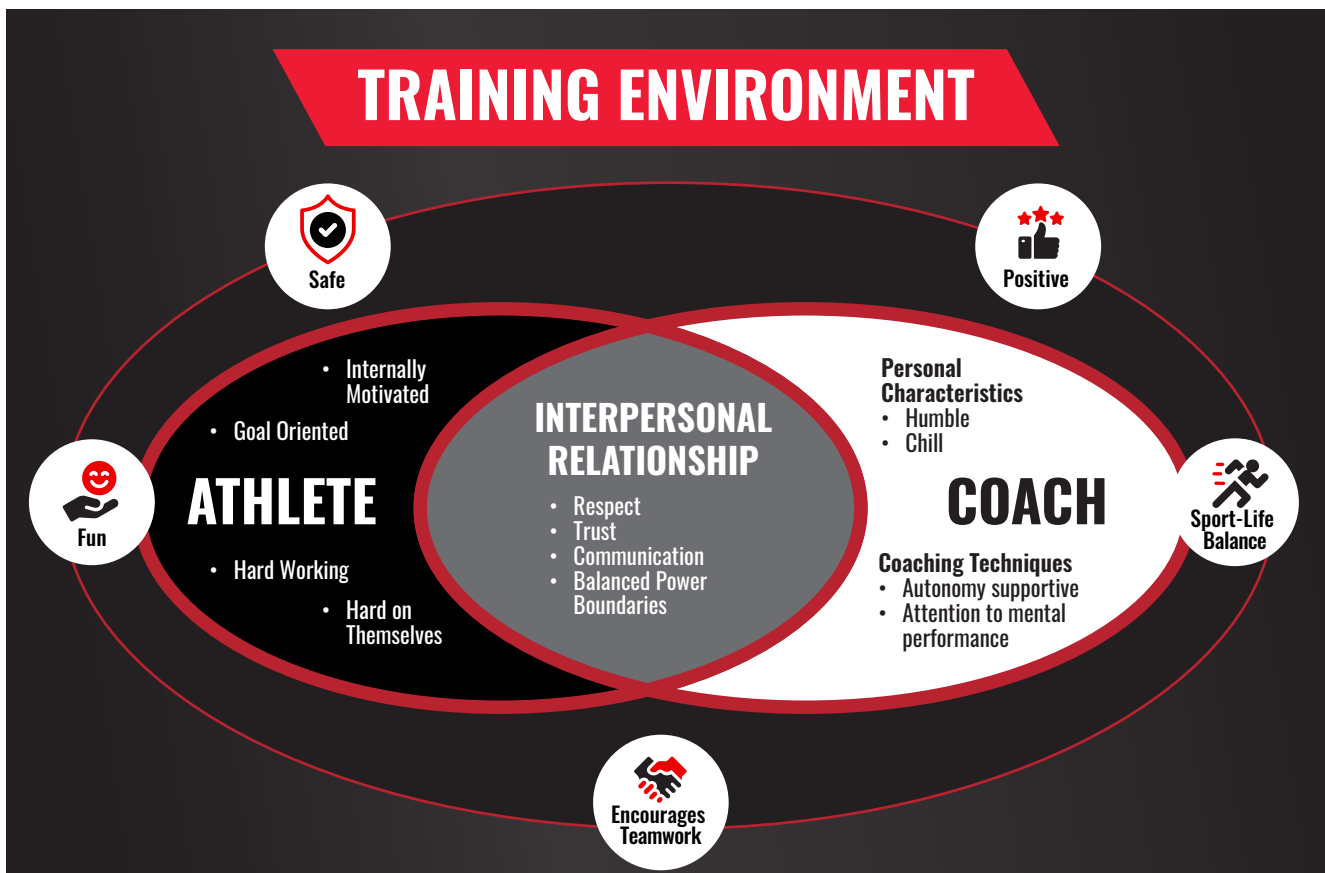
WHAT A POSITIVE SPORT EXPERIENCE LOOKS LIKE

The coaches and athletes in this study expressed four common elements that contributed to a successful sport experience, [Figure 1] including:

- Recognizing the personal attributes of the athletes and coaches (e.g., personality, disposition, motivation, work ethic),
- The coaching philosophies and techniques the coach uses (e.g., athlete-centred, autonomy-supportive),
- The interpersonal relationship between the coach and the athlete (e.g., respect, communication, balanced power),
- The working environment of the sport (e.g., safe, fun, positive).

Figure 1: Overview of a Positive Sport Experience

Figure 1 depicts the requisite characteristics of a positive sport experience (as defined by the 24 Olympic/Paralympic athletes and coaches in this study).



ATTRIBUTES OF THE ATHLETE

There were several common characteristics of athletes in this study, essentially creating a profile of what a high-performance athlete “brings to the table”. It’s important to get to know your athlete so you can work with their *strengths* while developing their weaknesses. For example, a consistent attribute of high-performance athletes was that they were highly internally motivated, and they had a drive to succeed. In response, coaches spent less time trying to “motivate their athletes” (e.g., by yelling or adding pressure) since they were already motivated and instead tried to support their mental and

physical health. Other consistent descriptors of high-performance athletes were that they were hard-working, doing their best, goal-oriented, and put a lot of pressure on themselves.

Coach Daniel summarized the importance of recognizing the attributes of his athletes:

“Because they are people? It’s not complicated. If they were robots or something or yeah, I don’t know. But like they are people, and so you have to treat them like people.”

Goal Oriented –
“I knew from like age five that I wanted to be an Olympian.”

“I knew from, like, age five that I wanted to be an Olympian. I wanted to be a professional athlete, so from kindergarten, like, that was the goal.”
— Rachel, World Champion

Internally Motivated –
“I always wanted to be better”

“I have always wanted to be better; I’m very internally motivated. I grew up with that as a kid, you know, I had that personality trait very young. And that is what allowed me to succeed in sport... I always wanted to be better.”
— Lilly, Olympic Champion

Hard Working –
“we don’t get to this level without pushing ourselves”

“We’re talking about high-performance athletes. We do not get to this level without wanting to push ourselves, without wanting to do well, without having that internal drive, and I think that it’s a little short-sighted to believe that we are just going to take the easy way out when we are trying to be the best in the world.”
— Andy, Olympic Champion

“I have athletes here in Canada that push themselves too much. These are the kind of athletes that are amazing because I need to tell them, ‘Stop!’ And this is the kind of athlete that you want to work with.”
— Coach Camila

Put Immense Pressure on Themselves –

"I'm internally putting more pressure on myself than anyone will ever put on me"

"In my head, I'm telling myself you better do this, like you, don't need to tell me as well, like I'm internally putting more pressure on myself than anyone will ever put on me and I think if they knew that and could see that I don't need another voice telling me to be better."

— Jesse, Olympic Champion

"Especially Olympic athletes, I want this like more than anyone! I want that medal; I want that performance. You don't need to tell me twice. Can you actually like remove some of this pressure?"

— Casey, Olympic Medalist

Trying their Hardest – "we are trying our best"

"I had some coaches that blamed us for stuff all the time if we weren't doing well. It was as if we were just making them look bad or whatever. But I was really feeling like we are here, this is our life, we are putting so much on the line for this and so obviously we are trying our best, and so, I mean give us credit for that and not just blame us."

— Coach Daniel (also an Olympian)

KEY FINDINGS

Athletes are people. They bring more to their sport than their bodies, they are not machines to be moulded. There are consistent mental, physical, and emotional traits that high-performance athletes have that allow them to succeed. These traits need to be recognized and fostered, not dismissed.

ATTRIBUTES OF THE COACH

Participants also described common characteristics of coaches who had positive coaching styles. This included being happy and chill, humble, eager to learn, recognizing their own limitations, and engaging in self-care.

COACH CHARACTERISTICS

<p>Happy & Chill – “he’s just a fun-loving guy”</p>	<p><i>“[My coach is] a fun-loving guy. He’s a loud, gigantic man... I have big audacious goals and he is just amped all the time about them.”</i> — Lilly, Olympic Champion</p> <p><i>“My coach definitely had a very positive demeanour, which really helped, but not naively so. Like when someone says everything is positive it makes them seem soft, but she was also willing to hold our feet to the flames.”</i> — Andy, Olympic Champion</p>
<p>Humble – “If you’re humble you are so much more teachable and open to learning.”</p>	<p><i>“My coach never wanted any like recognition or attention, or like it wasn’t for him, it was always for the athletes. It was not coming from the coach’s ego or like, I’m pushing you because I want this for me. It’s more like ‘No, I’m here to help you because I want you to reach your goals’.”</i> — Lucy, World Championship Medalist</p> <p><i>“I think pride is the downfall of most coaches. They are proud and they want to be recognized, but it’s actually insecurity. If you’re humble you are so much more teachable and open to learning. You’re not focused on yourself, but the bigger picture.”</i> — Coach Lawrence</p>
<p>Always Learning – “tell me how I can do it better”</p>	<p><i>“I am all about letting people in and come in, see what I do, and tell me how I can do it better, and I’ve been very open since day one with different people and saying come look at the program, if you have insights bring them because I am not the be all and end all.”</i> — Coach John</p>
<p>Knowing their Limits – “she would always bring in experts to work with us”</p>	<p><i>“One of the markers of a good coach to me is them knowing their limitations and having the willingness to bring in experts in their field to do what they do best, and work collaboratively with them. My coach had a vision and she would always bring in experts to work with us, from sport psychologists to [strength and conditioning] to sport scientists, to get us in the direction she was pointing.”</i> — Andy, Olympic Champion</p>
<p>Prioritizing their Own Health and Well-Being – “In order to support the athletes, you need to take care of yourself”</p>	<p><i>“I will say to our support staff, it’s not about you. And in order to support the athletes, you need to take care of yourself and to do that, we’ll support each other.”</i> — Coach Elaine</p>

COACHING TECHNIQUES/STYLES

Individualized –
“Each darn one of us
is a unique individual”

“So I’ve always described my job as, the actual coaching is the easy part. The understanding of the person and what makes them tick is the fun part of my job, and spending time with the athletes in different environments to understand who they are as people and how to support them”
— Coach John

Autonomy- Supportive –
“my athletes have a voice
in what they’re doing”

Allowing Choice

“It’s deliberate that my athletes have a voice in what they’re doing, there’s a choice, having them be part of decision-making, when appropriate, is important.”
— Coach Elaine

Ownership Over Their Performance

“At the end of the day, you’re on the line, you’re winning and losing the race. You weren’t alone in the process getting there, but you’re alone at the line, so it’s your career, you have to own it.”
— Jesse, Olympic Champion

Fostering Independence

“I want them to be self-sufficient, I want them to be able to solve their own problems, I want them to be confident in themselves, I don’t want to be the answer for everything.”
— Coach Brock

Allowing for questions

“I was curious, I made him think harder about why he was doing a certain workout, he knew I would question him on it. And it’s not a bad thing, it challenged us both... it’s just a curiosity piece for me, learning the sport, I needed to be student of my sport.”
— Hannah, World Champion

Embracing Mistakes –
“you’re going to fail a lot.”

“[mistakes are going] to happen more often than you’re going to succeed, it’s all about the ability to recover. You learn that through sport because you’re going to fail a lot.”
— Coach Henry

Separating the Person & Mistake

“I’ve seen coaches give the cold shoulder after a poor performance, and that’s the exact time you should be pumping their tires. When my athlete has a poor performance, I immediately go to them and say ‘we don’t have to chat about it now, I just want you to know I’m here to support you.’”
— Coach Brock

Adaptable Plans –
“We have to be able
to read our athletes”

“This belief that there’s only one style of coaching, that if you’re not science-based and making them do exactly what they should do every single day, in my opinion, is ludicrous. We have to be able to read our athletes, to see what they need and identify specifically, what they require physically and mentally.”
— Coach Vivian

<p>Positive Communication – “No screaming”</p>	<p>“No screaming. [my coach is] too relaxed. I’ve never heard him raise his voice, he would just say ‘I need you to push a little harder, I need you to do more on the next one’, and we have fun with it.” — Hannah, World Champion</p>
<p>Rest is Prioritized – “respect that rest is part of training”</p>	<p>“We have to respect that rest is part of training, we need both physical and mental recovery. They can’t be overloaded, if they don’t have a clear mind when they come to training, I can’t get the best out of them. And when I need them to push they will, because it’s balanced.” — Coach Matthieu</p>
<p>[Not] Addressing Physical Appearance – “my coach never said a word about my body”</p>	<p>“My first question is, are you physically able to do what you are intending to do? Can you do your skills? If you can that’s good enough. I’ve heard some coaches weighing athletes all the time, and ‘oh you’re half a pound more today, what did you do? Did you eat too much, did you skip your exercises?’ And blame them for that and if anything goes wrong in practice blame it on that half pound. For me, if I see fluctuations in my athletes’ weight I say, ‘well let’s see if you can do it’ and if you can, fantastic, you’ve increased the range of what you are comfortable doing.” — Coach Daniel</p>
<p>Building Life Skills/ Personal Development – “I fundamentally disagree that personal development and performance are on two ends of a spectrum”</p>	<p>“I fundamentally disagree that personal development and performance are on two ends of a spectrum. I think they are so interchangeable. There’s no magic book, we are humans, everything is different. I think personal development is important in the long run because it helps to create a better program and better athletes. I believe that in creating better humans you’ll get better athletes in the long term.” — Coach John.</p>

Participants elaborated on the coaching techniques that were used in positive sport environments. Important techniques that the participants shared were ensuring training was individualized, autonomy-supportive (allowing choice, fostering ownership, encouraging independence).

KEY FINDINGS

Coaches have a lot of power over their athletes. Their words, behaviours, and emotions can have a lasting impact on their athletes. A coach can change an athlete’s physical and mental performance. As such, power needs to be monitored to ensure athletes are in the best environment to thrive.

KEY FINDINGS

Positive coaching styles (e.g., autonomy-supportive, athlete-centred, transformational) are commonly reported with these coaches and athletes. Participants elaborated on the coaching techniques that were used in positive sport environments. Important techniques included being individualized and autonomy supportive (allowing choice, fostering ownership, encouraging independence).

A FOCUS ON MINDSET

Along with the physical training, coaches invested a lot in the mental aspects of sport performance.

Attention to athletes' mindset included the acknowledgement that mindset can impact performance. Coaches also recognized the importance of providing emotional support, providing support rather than adding pressure, and fostering athletes' internal drive.

Mindset Matters to Performance –
“how you separate yourself is with mental performance”

“Once I got into the mental aspect of things it made a world of difference because I started to realize what mindset I needed to be in to perform well, and what mindsets caused me to have a bad day on the track. I think that was the single biggest factor in my career that changed things from having a smattering of success to pretty consistently performing at my best... When you get to the level when you're competing against the best of the world, there's not much left to improve in terms of physical performance without using pharmaceuticals, so how you separate yourself is with mental performance and teamwork.”

— Andrew, Olympic Champion

Providing Emotional Support –
“my coach was actually invested in my emotional well-being”

“My coach has invested in my emotional well-being as much as he has in my performance. If I didn't see him [during training], he would check in through text or email to say, 'how are you, how's the workout feeling after yesterday?' like all that kind of stuff, he was actually invested in my emotional well-being.”

— Hannah, World Champion

Providing Support Not Pressure –
“we just need someone there to support us”

“We were talented and good at what we were doing, we just needed someone to kind of be there to support us, we didn't need him to be intense because we already were, he kind of helped balance out our stress and our intensity that we would just naturally bring ourselves. And that was really good for us.”

— Casey, Olympic Medalists

Foster Intrinsic Motivation –
“our goal is not to motivate; our goal is to inspire”

“I think, having been yelled at my whole career and taking pride in being able to deal with it, I look back at younger me and it's like, you didn't have to, you would have been successful and achieved what you wanted to achieve without that. You need to see athletes for who they are as people. Coaching often loses the human element in search of results, and if anything, you understand who the person is and motivate them based on that.”

— Rachel, World Champion

“Our goal is not to motivate; our goal is to inspire. We need to get rid of the word motivate, we want our athletes to be motivated, and we can't inspire them with anger or autocratic behaviours, because if they don't have ownership, it doesn't become their sport and their goals.”

— Coach Vivian

KEY FINDINGS

“You’ve got the technical training, but a lot of your role is just trying to support athletes and making sure they’re okay as people. If you’re just a coach you’re missing something, you’re a little bit of a parent, a psychologist, a little bit of a friend, a little bit of a guide, a little bit of everything. Sometimes you need to delegate things, like to a nutritionist, but basically, you’re there to support your athletes in any way that they need.”

— Coach Camila

ATTRIBUTES OF THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

A strong relationship between coaches and athletes is critical for success. Coaches shared their perspectives on the importance of fostering a strong relationship:

“The relationship with the athlete is the most important thing, the relationship with the athlete is the base for everything. If not, it’s just orders, there’s no coaching, it’s military. ‘You do as I say and that’s it’. The relationship with the athlete, the trust, is basically everything, it’s the foundation on which you build everything else.”

— Coach Camila

Athletes shared similar thoughts, to the extent that they would choose a coach they had a better relationship with over one with more technical expertise:

“I trained with a different coach there, someone who was more technically capable, and we didn’t necessarily have the relationship. It went well, but when I made the decision to go back to my first coaches and I fully invested. I trusted that they could get me to the place that I was trying to go to.”

— Lewis, Olympic Champion

Common characteristics of a strong coach-athlete relationship included being cared for as a person, rather than just an athlete, along with respect, trust, communication, balanced power, and maintaining boundaries within the relationship.

Caring for the individual –
“I wasn’t just another number to my coach”

“I wasn’t another number to my coach, I wasn’t another recruit, I was a person. I think that’s how he worked with all his athletes; every athlete felt special.”

— Hannah, World Champion

Attention to their mental health

“We had one athlete who was asked to leave the high-performance centre because they were spending a lazy day in bed one day. Therefore, they were lazy. But if you know of an athlete who is spending a day in bed uncharacteristically, would your first thought not be is this athlete struggling? Does this athlete feel like they have a place to belong? Is this athlete struggling with mental health issues or depression? Whatever we need to find a way to support them.”

— Coach Vivian

Mutal Respect –
“it’s a two-sided street”

If you want your coach to respect you, you need to respect them as well. Everything is a two-sided street, it’s never just one way. It’s the coaches’ job, they have a lot of knowledge... and having the respect towards the work they’re doing to help you achieve your goal, and then vice versa, you want them to respect you as a person. You want them to respect your physical health, your wellbeing... for me it’s having an open mind seeing it from the other person’s perspective and having respect for the people around you”

— Lucy, World Championship Medalist

Trust –
“the relationship needs to be built on trust”

“The relationship needs to be built on trust, trust that you really see them, that you understand what’s going on with them, that they know you listen and understand them. Then they will trust you when you say, “okay I need this, this and this”, and they say ‘sounds good.’”

— Coach Camila

Invest in Building Trust

“You just have to earn it. There’s no other way but you have to earn their trust, and that’s through the conversations and coaching. There’s no other process other than time and conversations. I can’t force it and give them my CV and say ‘I went to 4 Olympics and I have coached in multiple countries’”

— Coach John

Open Communication –
“we are a really strong team because we can be on the same page”

“Having that open communication [with my coach] allowed me to take another step forward in my performance.”

— Lilly, Olympic Champion

“I can always talk to my coach about anything, and the conversations are not always sunshine and rainbows, we have to have hard conversations, but those are important to be able to move forward. It has allowed us to be a really really strong team because we can be on the same page.”

— Lucy, World Championship Medalist

Balanced Power –
“I know a healthy relationship never involves control”

“I know a healthy relationship never involves the word control.”

— Coach Brock

“My coach is another teammate as opposed to an authority figure, and that’s become much more productive.”

— Rachel, World Champion

Maintaining Boundaries –
“We can be friendly but we are not friends”

“There is this perception that a transformational coach is a mom, but I’m not a mom to my athletes. I’m not a friend to my athletes. We even have this conversation, we can be friendly, I am going to be your coach and will guide you any time, but we are not friends. It’s important to have that step away.”

— Coach Vivian

A POSITIVE SPORT ENVIRONMENT

Participants described several attributes of a positive environment. Athlete Andy discussed the transformational impact of the positive environment her coach created:

“There was a pretty significant culture shift ahead of the Olympics, when my abusive coach was let go. We had a new coach come in who had a very different methodology of coaching, she would say weird things like ‘good job’ and ‘I’m proud of you’ and we kind of worked through the scar tissue we didn’t really know was there and became a team that would support each other and rise together. We took time to form our culture, and it was this huge shift towards openness, transparency, honesty, challenging each other, and trust.”

<p>Safe – “You want it to be welcoming and inclusive”</p>	<p><i>“We have to stay conscious and talk about safe sport. My staff and I always ask, ‘are you comfortable here? Is it okay for you?’ And have different people ask those questions, not just people in positions of power. We need an environment that is inclusive and comfortable.”</i> — Coach Brock</p>
<p>Positive – “creating a space that they can have a positive experience”</p>	<p><i>“We need to create a positive caring environment, not just the coach caring about the athletes but teaching athletes to care about each other.”— Coach Vivian</i></p> <p><i>“Everyone has things they are dealing with outside of training, so creating a space that [athletes] can have a positive experience there and can be able to challenge themselves.”</i> — Coach Elaine</p>
<p>Fun – “this notion that having fun is soft, and you need to be mentally tough is outdated”</p>	<p><i>“We have hard sessions, so having a bit of fun along the way, making jokes and stuff, I want to make sure there are smiles.”</i> — Coach Brock</p> <p><i>“It doesn’t have to be fun to be fun. I’m not saying we had a ball every day, it was hard, but this notion that having fun is soft, and you need to be mentally tough is outdated.”</i> — Andy, Olympic Champion</p>
<p>Encourages Teamwork – “athletes need connection, they need a team environment”</p>	<p><i>“At all levels of sport, grassroots to competitive levels, athletes need the same thing, they need connection, they need a team environment... because it’s an individual sport, athletes think it’s about getting themselves better, but it’s about being part of this team”</i> — Coach Vivian</p>
<p>Prioritizes Sport Life Balance – “it’s easy for sport to become all encompassing”</p>	<p><i>“It’s important to have social interactions, have time with your friends and family, do things outside the gym, my coach always told me to do things that would take my mind off training. He was like, find a hobby, play an instrument, learn to cook, do something different that’s stimulating and relaxing. And as a kid, you don’t need that intensity, it’s easy for sport to become all encompassing.”</i> — Lucy, World Championship Medalist</p>

KEY FINDINGS

You can have a positive environment (i.e., fun, safe, welcoming), while also achieving performance excellence.

[RE]DEFINING SUCCESS

Coaches and athletes in this study articulated their versions of success:

COACH BROCK

I don't have a formal exit interview with athletes when they retire, but if I did, I'd probably ask two questions:

"Did you feel cared for on a scale of one to ten?"

And then question two would be:

"Do you feel we did everything possible to maximize your journey and performance?"

And I think everything else stems from that. I can remember stats and Personal Bests, and don't get me wrong, I am competitive, but I like when it's fun.

LUCY, WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP MEDALIST

"Maybe our values shouldn't be that we need to produce Olympians, maybe it should be to find excellence and whatever that's going to be for you... My experiences aren't make or break because I get a medal or not... we need to redefine success because some days it's just getting out of bed and turning up."

KEY FINDINGS

Sport success was not only defined by medal count by participants. Success was measured by personal performance excellence, personal development, physical and emotional well-being, satisfaction, and fostering longevity of athletes' sport careers.

These are the five aspects that participants commonly discussed as part of a successful sport experience:

1. Personal performance metrics



2. Personal development



3. Well-being



4. Enjoyment



5. A desire to stay in sport





Personal Performance Excellence –
“winning or being the best isn’t the goal”

“Not everyone’s going to be an Olympic champion or a world champion, but my coach can still help [athletes] achieve really cool stuff, like going to nationals, or going to worlds, or being really fit and healthy”
— Casey, Olympic Medalist



Personal Development –
“we refer to it as creating good humans”

“My high-performance director and I always just refer to it as creating good humans. It was fun for me at the Olympics when our team did perform well that word came out of a lot of people’s mouths that didn’t know anything or weren’t part of our program, a lot of the media was like, I like dealing with your team they are good people. That for me was ‘We won’ and the medal was a bonus.”
— Coach John

“I don’t want to win medals, like really, if it doesn’t make them a better human. I don’t want medals, I’d rather be a good person that comes in second really.”
— Coach Lawrence



Well-being –
“above all, athlete well-being has to be the number 1 priority”

“But I think above all, athlete well-being has to be the number 1 priority. So even if it’s, I want to win a gold medal at the Olympics, that should be understood as, I want to be healthy physically and mentally and have my wellbeing taken into account AND win a gold medal at the Olympics, or whatever the goal is, have the preamble understood as, we are not going to cross boundaries to get them.”
— Coach Daniel

“Success isn’t just an outcome or just a ranking or because we could argue what’s more successful is it a swimmer that comes fourth at worlds? Swimming a personal best, while having a complete life, not going through depression post games, or is success if she had given up every other aspect of her life to maybe get a 10th of a second that would have pushed her third, have a medal and then crash hard... there’s a lot that goes into our collective definitions of success.”
— Coach Eric



Enjoyment –
“all the things I love about my sport have nothing to do with sport itself”

“All the things I love about my sport have nothing to do with the sport itself. It’s about the people I get to surround myself with, it’s about pushing past failure, it’s about doing something you had never thought possible. I love the office that we get to work with, I love that we get to work outdoors, and I love that there is a nice blend of pushing yourself to be the best but in a team sport setting. We really rise together and I think that was one of my biggest learnings through the Olympics was that I believe we won our gold medal off of culture.”

— Andy, Olympic Champion

“I think sport at the high-performance level is the same thing as the grassroots level. Why do young people join sport? Fun, friendship, fitness, the joy of participating in a group activity, so many personal reasons that people join the sport for. That’s what sports is about on every single level, and we’ve turned it into a business.”

— Coach Vivian



A desire to stay in sport –
“it’s not just about having talent, but ensuring talent stays”

“It’s not just about having talent, but ensuring talent stays... It just wasn’t sustainable growing into a young woman to be under that stress, pressure, and regiment... with my new coach I can still be my own person and do things and live a really normal, it’s way more sustainable...I excelled in [positive and negative environments] but it was the sustainability”

— Amy, Olympic Medalist

“A holistic way forward is not just a road to the podium, it’s also a road to the strength and community of your sport. Athletes who have gone through this program are now going to be more likely to contribute back to sport, financially or in their community, they are going to be better leaders and advocate for your sport and want to stay rather than burning bridges and walking away with a bad taste in your mouth. Not only do we win in the short term with the very real possibility of medals and the funding that comes from that, we win in the long game because our sport is going to be so much richer.”

— Andy, Olympic Champion

KEY FINDINGS

Winning isn’t everything

Winning medals was not the only thing that determines success in sport. This is especially interesting coming from those who have won medals. What this tells us is that sport is about more than just winning, there are many reasons why people engage in sport, and therefore, these aspects should also be considered when building a successful sport program.

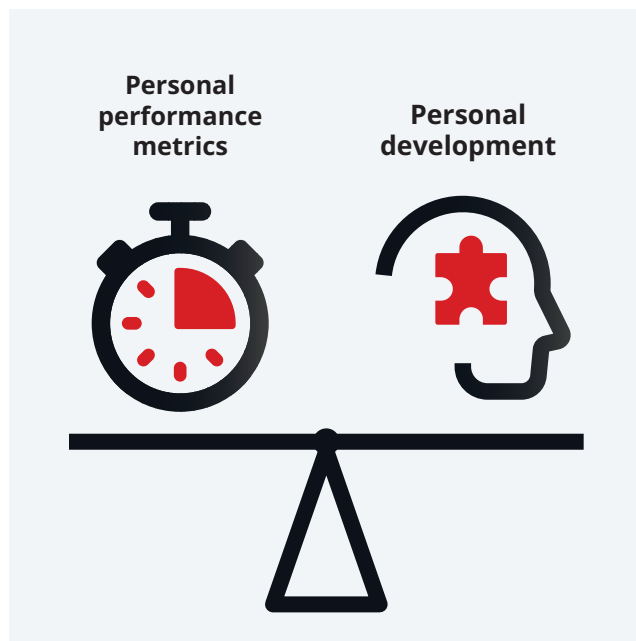
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES CAN GO HAND-IN-HAND

COACH ELAINE

"I think you can do both, and I believe that in the past there's been like having one or the other, you either have fun and love the sport, or you win at all costs. I've tried to say that we can actually do both like, have fun, appreciate where we are. Be respectful, and also, we can win, like you can actually do both."

COACH BROCK

"Don't get me wrong, I am competitive, we like winning, winning is fun, we can't lose sight of that, but you can win without casualties. And I think most athletes like winning too and it is fun, but if that's the only thing? Oof... the sport's too hard, you're going to get your ass kicked way too often. If your entire self-worth is that tiny little time you win, you're going to be miserable. The Olympics is really important, it matters, but it isn't the only thing that matters."



TAKE HOME MESSAGES

- Achieving international medals is possible in a positive sport environment
- There are additional benefits of positive coaching such as improved competition performance, easier to train, increased resiliency, increased enjoyment, and longevity of an athlete's sport career
- A performance-only approach decreases performance and also decreases mental health, and motivation, and increases the desire to drop out of sport.
- Athletes and coaches did not believe that the medal was worth it if it was won in a negative sport environment
- Positive coaching involves recognizing and fostering the consistent attributes of an athlete (internally motivated, goal-oriented, hard-working, hard on themselves), a coach (their characteristics, philosophies, and techniques), a healthy coach-athlete relationship (trust, respect, open communication, balanced power, established boundaries), and a healthy training environment (safe, fun, positive, encourages teamwork, and sport-life balance),
- Positive coaching styles (e.g., athlete-centered, autonomy supportive, transformational) are effective coaching styles
- Positive coaching also includes attention to an athlete's mindset because the mind-body connection is recognized as an important part of performance.
- Finally, success was not only defined by medal count, but rather, markers of success included personal performance excellence, personal development, physical and emotional well-being, satisfaction, and fostering longevity of athletes' sport careers.
- Additionally, participants were adamant that performance outcomes and personal development can go hand and hand.
- Bringing this together, this study provides evidence that international medal success CAN be achieved through positive sport experiences. As such, we urge sport practitioners to adopt a positive approach to sport at all levels of participation. By doing so, it will also reduce behaviours of maltreatment that are currently harming our athletes and our sports.

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