

The vehicle to success: CAR can transport coach and athlete on a journey of fulfilment

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coach-athlete relationship



Dr [Sophia Jowett](#), Reader of Psychology at Loughborough University and ConnectedCoaches Content Champion, presents a compelling case for the coach-athlete relationship (CAR) theory, explaining that its underpinning values lie at the heart of effective coaching.

- A coach-athlete relationship can be defined as the interconnection of interpersonal thoughts, feelings and behaviours.
- The positive outcomes of developing a successful relationship include physical, social, emotional and psychological growth and development.
- Some of the active ingredients needed for the relationship to flourish are communicating, interacting, disclosing, sharing, leading, following, listening, helping, guiding and nurturing.
- The '3 Cs Model' is a framework that allows coaches to measure and observe the quality of their relationship.
- 'Two is better than one if two can act as one.'

Forming a healthy relationship of any kind requires plenty of **honest communication** and a considerable **investment of time** and energy, by both parties, if the bond is to thrive and become stronger.

In the context of a partnership between coach and athlete, time and [energy](#) spent by the coach at the start of the relationship will resonate with the athlete, as it will demonstrate a keen level of interest in their personal development, and convince them that you genuinely care about their progress.

The upshot will be a more open line of communication, providing a foundation on which mutual trust and respect can be built, leading to an overall elevation in the quality of the connection.

For Dr Jowett, this evolving, flourishing coach-athlete relationship can be best envisaged metaphorically.

Forging a mutually strong connection can serve as a powerful, effective and successful vehicle, she says, that can transport the coach and the athlete to a better place.

A highly appropriate analogy when you consider the acronym for coach-athlete relationship spells out CAR.

The quest for quality

Stretching the metaphor a fraction further, you might also think of the relationship in terms of a car share, negotiating the potholes and bumps in the road **together** on this path to success. Indeed, knowing when to tap in to your inner Peter Kay on this car share journey will be a bonus, as a sense of humour can go a long way.

In her keynote speech at the Open University's second annual Sport and Fitness Conference in Milton Keynes, entitled Contemporary Issues in Sports Coaching, Dr Jowett – a world expert in the field of coach-athlete relationships – explained that the **quality of the bond can have a hugely transformative effect on the development journey of both parties.**

‘The quality of the relationship makes the journey so much more rewarding, satisfying and fulfilling,’ she said.

What's not to like about such an attractive theory? Any motivational coaching model that can be used as a powerful tool to drive performance gain and to help individual athletes fulfil their potential is surely worth shouting about.

It appeals to common sense and appears simple enough to execute in practice (used in conjunction with an effective framework, as we shall see). And the results, for both parties, speak of satisfaction and inspiration, as well as physical, social, emotional and psychological growth and development.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves by championing these positive outcomes.

There is a saying, ‘A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.’

That first step for a coach should be to take the time to appreciate the premise of CAR theory, and just why relationship building within a coaching setting can be such a productive engine for growth.

After all, you can't sell something you don't believe in or have a sound knowledge of.

Sophia Jowett

The playground of social interaction

It is important, then, to first of all recognise and embrace the idea that coaching is a social process.

Addressing the delegates, Dr Jowett (*pictured above, right*) presumed that, whatever a person's preferred definition of the term coaching, the images conjured up will likely be of coaches and athletes interacting and communicating in different sporting and physical activity settings, such as pitches, parks, courts, tracks, halls and fields, where feedback is provided, questions are asked, influencing takes place and decisions are made.

She explained that a coach-athlete relationship can be defined as the interconnection of interpersonal thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

'Many experts have acknowledged that coaching is an interpersonal process, but none of these experts have really put the coach-athlete bond at the forefront,' said Dr Jowett.

'Coaches and athletes can equally contribute to coaching so therefore, for me, at the heart of coaching lies the coach and the athlete and the connection that they develop during the course of their sporting involvement.

'Neither coach nor athlete can do it alone. They both need one another. So the relationship is instrumental as it holds all the active ingredients needed for success: communicating; interacting; disclosing; sharing; doing things together and separately; exchanging information; leading; following; listening; helping; guiding; nurturing. These active ingredients help both to grow, develop and succeed.'

These ingredients are fundamental to the nurturing of a 'quality' relationship. If some key elements are missing, then the relationship will undoubtedly suffer, and goals and needs will be destined to remain unfulfilled.

Gardeners responsible for cultivating plants must adhere to the same simple principle. Deprived of the key ingredients of water, sunlight and carbon dioxide, the plants' growth will be stunted. The objects to which the gardeners devote so much **time** and **energy** (and sometimes even **communicate** with – although, admittedly, these are one-sided conversations!) will never reach full bloom.

'Good quality relationships make us feel more satisfied, energised, supported, rewarded, accommodated, encouraged, comforted and reassured (at every level of performance),' added Dr Jowett, emphasising the rewards.

When one plus one equals one

The Spice Girls had a number 1 hit with '2 Become 1'. It wasn't an ode to sports coaching, but it could have been.

Mike Krzyzewski, meanwhile, the former head coach of the men's senior USA basketball team, who guided them to Olympic gold in London in 2012, **was** talking about the coach-athlete relationship when he expressed similarly worded sentiments at an International Olympic Committee Conference: '**Two is better than one if two can act as one.**'

You can interpret ‘better’ as meaning that both will develop more self-confidence, be more passionate, have higher levels of team cohesion and collective efficacy, lower levels of conflict and higher levels of well-being, said Dr Jowett.

She added: ‘So the way I feel as an athlete will affect my coach’s feelings, and will then shape their behaviours and thoughts. And the way my coach acts and interacts with me will shape the way I think, feel and indeed behave.’

Dr Jowett’s methodology is grounded in 20 years of research and theory.

And she has developed a framework – **The 3 Cs Conceptual Model** – to help coaches grasp more concretely the essence of CAR, and enable them to transfer the principles into their coaching practice.

The construct allows coaches to measure and observe the quality of their relationship by capturing the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of the coach and athlete.

‘It also allows us to understand the process of accumulating evidence in a systematic way and can be used to identify problem areas and assess relationship issues between the coach and athlete,’ she added.

The 3 Cs are **closeness**, **commitment** and **complementarity**.

Dr Jowett gives detailed tips on how to improve these three pivotal properties and thereby achieve a relational environment in a previous [ConnectedCoaches blog](#), and in a series of three [ConnectedCoaches infographics](#).

The more compact version of the construct is provided below, which was featured in her keynote presentation.

3 Cs Model

- ***Closeness*** (= *interpersonal feelings*)
- *refers to the emotional connection or affective bond developed between a coach and an athlete.*
- *it contains such relational properties as trust, respect, appreciation, interpersonal liking, emotional caring.*
- ***Commitment*** (= *interpersonal thoughts*)
- *defines the intention of the coach and the athlete to maintain a close relationship over time.*
- *it contains such relational properties as loyalty through good and bad times, from season to season, as well as reliance for future development and success.*
- ***Complementarity*** (= *interpersonal behaviours*)
- *describes coach and athlete behaviours that are cooperative, collaborative (teamwork) and supportive.*
- *corresponding and reciprocal behaviours.*

Armed with this effective framework, and having cogitated over the social process of coaching and the fabulous outcomes that await those who successfully nurture a quality relationship over time, you are nearly ready to commence your journey.

But there are some important additional points to consider to ensure a smoother ride:

- Be mindful of athletes’ different individual characteristics.
- Remember that athletes’ needs and goals may differ depending on the age group, gender, sport or level you coach.
- Be aware that, with newly established relationships, you will require time to develop the quality you strive for.
- Understand the intricacies of relationship building: a familiarity with the concept of [emotional](#)

[intelligence \(EI\)](#), for example, can facilitate the relationship-building process and help minimise conflict.

- For those who only see their athletes face-to-face one or two hours a week (or less), consider alternative ways of devoting sufficient time and energy to the relationship, such as communicating via Skype or FaceTime, emails or telephone.

Spread the word

Dr Jowett is on a mission to raise awareness of the importance of high quality coach-athlete relationships.

By communicating her findings from two decades of painstaking study, the idea is to educate coaches and coach educators so that they (and their athletes) may reap the benefits and be inspired to circulate the dynamic message that underpins the theory – forming a virtuous circle.

A good advertisement will target the right customers and promote the full range of benefits of what it is you are trying to market.

As an advertisement for CAR, Dr Jowett's presentation to around 50 industry professionals at the Open University had the desired effect. And hopefully this blog will transmit the message to different corners of the coaching community.

Its unique selling point is that using the 3 Cs Model as a framework can help you unlock and enhance your athletes' capabilities, and increase the chances of them being successful and fulfilling their potential.

The onus is now on you to take over the baton and spread the word by educating those under **your** wing so that they too are sold on the idea that building a quality connection can transport coach and athlete on a journey towards personal satisfaction and achievement.

You have been given the keys to the ignition. It's time to start the engine.

Please let us know your thoughts on building an effective coach-athlete relationship by leaving a comment below.

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If you're looking to develop better, more effective and successful relationships with your athletes, [Tandem](#) is an evidence-based coaching software tool that will help you do just that. The tool aims to help identify vulnerabilities and challenges that may limit progress within the competitive sport context. It can promote understanding of interpersonal strengths and weaknesses by identifying barriers that may prevent exceptional personal development and performance accomplishments.

Thanks to a new partnership with Tandem, ConnectedCoaches members can receive **unlimited free Tandem reports for all of 2017**. You can find out more about Tandem by reading [Chris Chapman's review](#). Download the attachment at the end of the blog to discover how to take advantage of this great offer.

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