Put the Score on the Back Burner: Coach–Athlete Relationships and Anxiety

Tiffany Peterson
Brigham Young University

Recommended Citation

Put the Score on the Back Burner: Coach–Athlete Relationships and Anxiety

Tiffany L. Peterson
Brigham Young University

Abstract

Anxiety is a very prevalent mental disorder among adolescents and can be unfavorable to their developing mental, cognitive, and social health. Although it comes in many forms, social anxiety disorder, which can affect peer relations, academic success, and sport performance, can be especially difficult during teenage years. More specifically, high school sports provide many situations and stressors that can trigger social anxiety. Some major aspects of high school sports that can trigger social anxiety are working with teammates and learning from coaches. This review seeks to provide a better understanding of the effect that the coach–athlete relationship has on anxiety in high school student-athletes using two of the most common styles of coaching found in self-determination theory (SDT): autonomous and authoritative. Other subtypes of autonomous coaching styles and their effectiveness are also explored. Additionally, ideas are given on how to better train coaches to work with student athletes who are experiencing social anxiety.

185

Teenage years are considered some of the most difficult years of life; however, these years may be even harder with anxiety disorders (Dryman et al., 2016). Specifically, common effects of anxiety in adolescents include impaired academic success and stunted mental and social growth (de Lijter et al., 2018). For example, parents may notice their child with anxiety avoiding or being irritable in social situations (Weymouth & Buehler, 2018). This may include trying to skip school often or making excuses to miss social events, which often results in teens feeling lonely and getting behind in school. Consequently, Turner et al. (1993) identify poor academic achievement as an indicator of anxiety. Thus, anxiety can be detrimental to the biological, psychological, and sociological well-being of the adolescent affected.

While anxiety is detrimental to the well-being of teenagers, participation in athletics may exacerbate anxiety symptoms. Certainly, student-athletes are regularly put under high amounts of pressure during practice and competition, which may lead to or trigger anxiety (Craft, Magyar, Becker, & Feltz, 2003). Student-athletes are expected not only to perform well in competition, but also to balance a busy schedule of long school days, practices/competitions, and social activities. Gomes, Faria, and Vilela (2017) suggest that athletes with anxiety are more subject to burnout than athletes who do not have anxiety. In other words, student-athletes with anxiety tend to feel overwhelmed quicker than those who do not have anxiety. Thus, anxiety can cause athletes to underperform (Woodman & Hardy, 2003), perhaps leading to social rejection from teammates, coaches, and peers; this in turn causes the athlete to experience more anxiety (Felton & Jowett, 2013).

Felton and Jowett (2013) propose that the pressures high school coaches place on their athletes can have a serious impact on the anxiety of a teenager. Although many coaches have a positive impact on their athletes, some may trigger anxiety through their authoritative coaching styles and negative feedback (Mouratidis, Lens, & Vansteenkiste, 2010). When coaches give individual negative feedback to an athlete in front of a group, the athlete may feel embarrassed, anxious, or shameful. Meanwhile, corrective feedback

186

in an autonomous-supportive coaching style can provide motivation and promote well-being in a student-athlete (Mouratidis et al., 2010). This coaching style is implemented by helping athletes set and reach goals through encouragement, rather than criticism. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS, 2020) require high school coaches to take minimal training before beginning their jobs, and not much research exists to determine whether the training is effective. Therefore, this review will discuss the potential benefits of training high school coaches to coach with an autonomous style.

Social Anxiety Disorder

Social anxiety disorder affects 10–15% of the general population (Bandelow & Michaelis, 2015) and 13% of students (Jefferson, 2001). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) claims that social anxiety (sometimes referred to as social phobia) is characterized by an intense fear of social interaction and possible negative evaluation (Reichenberger et al., 2019). To be more precise, the DSM–5 describes intense fear as an increase of sweating, heart rate, blushing, and trembling (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In general, high school years are full of social activities that are critical to the development of the adolescent, yet teenagers with a social anxiety disorder may find it difficult to find a sense of belonging among their peers (de Lijter et al., 2017). Specifically, Erath et al. (2007) found that a teenager who struggles with social anxiety may be more vulnerable to peer victimization and is more likely to be ostracized. With hundreds to thousands of students in one building, schools provide many of the stressors needed to trigger social anxiety.

De Lijter et al. (2018) claim that teenagers with anxiety may fail to develop social competencies, which can impact their success in adulthood. Traumatic events caused by social anxiety in teenage years may lead to the onset of other mental disorders (Idsoe, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2012). In particular, those who suffer from social anxiety may feel intense loneliness that can eventually lead to the development of major depressive disorder (Boivin, Hymel, & Bukowski, 1995). Ranta, Kaltiala-Heino, Rantanen, and Marttunen (2009) found that adolescents with social phobias are eight times as likely to be bullied

187

than their non-anxious peers, which can lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (Idsoe et al., 2012). Consequently, this disorder can have major implications for the future of the adolescent.

Social Anxiety in Education

Education has a major impact on the adolescent's future. Unfortunately, the rate of truancy and school avoidance is higher in students with social phobias (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003). Students with social anxiety may avoid school because they lack the assertiveness to build and maintain friendships (Inderbitzen-Noland, Anderson, & Johnson, 2007). Furthermore, students may struggle to reach out to their teachers for help when they are having a difficult time grasping mandatory material. These social avoidances can lead to other problems in a student's education, which could impact their future.

Research conclusively shows that performance in high school is a major indicator of performance in college (Toldson & McGee, 2014). In other words, failure to perform well in high school may inhibit future success in college. Following this further, Cohen and his colleagues (2019) found that students with social anxiety disorders perform poorer in school than their peers. Particularly, these students may have performance anxiety on their exams and presentations that can result in lower grade point averages, thus giving them a smaller chance of qualifying to enter a university (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003). Consequently, teenage students with social anxiety are less likely to attend higher education (de Lijter et al., 2018), narrowing their opportunities in career selection as an adult.

Social Anxiety in Athletics

With so much social interaction in various contexts, students who suffer from anxiety in educational settings may find their anxiety compounded when they participate in sports. With more social interaction comes a greater opportunity for negative evaluation. This negative evaluation comes from not only teammates but also opposing team members, spectators, coaches, officials (umpires, referees, etc.), and parents (Van Zalk, Tillfors, & Trost, 2018). Likewise, Woodman

188

and Hardy (2003) found that anxiety can have a negative impact on the performance of an adolescent athlete and result in lower self-confidence. Consequently, student-athletes who struggle with social anxiety may have a difficult time participating in athletic events.

Competitive Team Sports

Although athletics may frequently act as exposure therapy for some to help alleviate anxiety (Ashdown-Franks, Sabiston, Solomon-Krakus, and O'Loughlin, 2017), the stress of competitive team sports can inversely trigger social anxiety in other athletes. Accordingly, the DSM–5 contains a performance specification for social anxiety disorder, which states that "the fear is restricted to speaking or performing only" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 203). For example, teenagers who do not normally experience social anxiety outside of sports may suddenly experience it while competing in games, meets, and tournaments in front of many of their peers. This unexpected anxiety can affect their performance abilities, cause them to underperform, or lead to burnout symptoms early in their high school athletic career. (Craft et al., 2003; Gomes et al., 2017). Thus, the fear of performing poorly in public and the possibility of being negatively evaluated may deter many teenagers from taking part in these types of activities (Erath et al., 2007).

The performance specifier is not the only way that student-athletes can be affected by a social anxiety disorder. In fact, the whole concept of team sports—working together with peers under the direction of a coaching staff—is full of social anxiety stressors (Ashdown-Franks et al., 2017). Teenage athletes are frequently pushed out of their comfort zone in order to gain new skills that help to contribute to the success of the team. Erath et al. (2007) found that when an athlete fails to gain the skills needed, to perform adequately, or to interact with the team in an appropriate way, the added stressor of correction from a coach or from their teammates can be a major anxiety trigger. Unfortunately, after an athlete with social anxiety experiences negative evaluation at practice or during a competition, they tend to begin to feel anxious about merely going to practices or competitions (Erath et al., 2007). Consequently, correction following

189

poor performance can negatively affect the relationship between a socially anxious athlete and their coaches and teammates. Thus, coaches should be mindful of their correction methods, or coaching styles, in order to avoid athlete burnout and enhance overall team performance.

Sport Participation

Contrary to many studies done on the negative effects of social anxiety in athletics, a longitudinal study done by Ashdown-Franks et al. (2017) assessed the effect that sport participation in high school had on alleviating social anxiety. Seven hundred and eighty-one high school athletes were evaluated for four types of anxiety: agoraphobia, panic disorder, general anxiety disorder, and social phobia. All athletes were assessed for each of these types of anxiety each year in high school, as well as the three years following their graduation. Although individual sports would seem to aggravate social phobias, Ashdown-Franks et al. (2017) found that participation in individual sports in high school slightly alleviated social phobia. They attributed these benefits to the athletes being under individual evaluation from coaches and spectators.

Further, Dimech and Seiler (2011) conducted a cohort study on the effects of extra-curricular team sport participation and social anxiety. In studying 200 primary school children, they found that increased participation in team sports helped to alleviate social anxiety symptoms. To those who experience social anxiety, team sports may be considered a safe place in order to experience, be exposed to, and overcome their fear of negative evaluation. In fact, exposure to fear of evaluation is one of the leading therapeutic techniques known for social phobias (Weeks et al., 2012). With supportive teammates and coaches, team sports may have the potential to help alleviate social anxiety in athletes. Inversely, unsupportive and overly critical teammates and coaches may turn a potential safe haven into a social phobia-inducing environment.

Coaching Styles

As mentioned previously, the way coaches lead and provide correction to members of their team during practices and games can have an impact on student-athletes' anxiety. Mouratidis, Lens,

190

and Vansteenkiste (2010) claim that all correction, feedback, and teaching can be referred to as "coaching style," which is an integral aspect of the coach–athlete relationship. Felton and Jowett (2013) found that the coach–athlete relationship can satisfy psychological needs, such as a need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (sense of belonging). Furthermore, coaching styles affect the social and motivational climate at both practices and competitions (Felton & Jowett, 2013). This indicates that the type of coaching style chosen can have a significant impact on athletes' mental health. Self-determination theory (SDT) provides two of the most commonly used coaching styles: authoritarian and autonomy-supportive coaching. Ultimately, each coaching style can have a major impact on student-athletes and their anxiety—one for the better, the other for the worse (Mouratidis et al., 2010).

Authoritarian Coaching

Because the coach–athlete relationship can have such a major impact on the well-being of student-athletes (Kim, Kim, & Wong, 2018), and because little to no treatment for anxiety is provided at the high school level, it is important that coaching styles be chosen wisely. Mouratidis et al. (2010) claims that coaches using the authoritarian coaching style may induce guilt (e.g., "We are losing because you aren't boxing out."), shame (e.g., "Even my five-year-old kid could make that shot."), conditional regard (e.g., "Why should I help you when you ignored my advice last time?"), correction in front of the entire team (e.g. "You are the only one not getting back on defense."), and threats of punishment (e.g., "If you miss another shot, you are sitting on the bench."). Also, these coaches may be controlling in games or practices and pressure athletes to perform certain ways. Not all correction comes vocally; in fact, a great deal of correction comes through body language, such as looks of disappointment and non-verbal punishments (e.g. frowning, shaking head, or rolling eyes; Mouratidis et al., 2010). Additionally, authoritarian coaching styles can reduce the feeling of competence in student-athletes (Felton & Jowett, 2013), which can lead to less acceptance of correction given by a coach (Mouratidis et al., 2010). This can also reduce the confidence

191

of the player to perform well. Accordingly, Felton and Jowett (2013) found that the authoritarian coaching style may be ineffective and lead to ill-being in student-athletes.

Theoretically, authoritarian styles of leadership could be detrimental to the well-being of any teenager, but especially to socially anxious high school athletes who spend multiple hours a day with their coaches. Van Zalk, Tillfors, and Trost (2018) found that over-control by authority figures can lead to the development and worsening of social anxiety in adolescents. Additionally, correction in public by a head or assistant coach may well be one of the largest social anxiety stressors in team sports (Ashdown-Franks et al., 2017), especially in a game when a crowd of the athlete's peers is watching. Public correction of a student-athlete could also lead to feelings of shame and guilt, which may lead them to feel even more anxiety (Mouratidis et al., 2010). Finally, considering the potential influence coaches have and how detrimental authoritative coaching styles can be for athletes with anxiety, a different coaching style may be more favorable.

Autonomy-Supportive Coaching

Not all coaching styles prompt social anxiety. Some coaching styles, such as autonomy-supportive coaching, not only reduce social anxieties but may provide student-athletes with the skills to overcome them altogether (Ashdown-Franks et al., 2017). One of the main facets of this coaching style is that athletes can be autonomous originators of their own actions and agents of free will (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Additionally, Mouratidis et al. (2010) describe some of the fundamental actions of a coach using the autonomy-supportive style: providing athletes with options and freedom of choice, seeking to understand the personal situation of an athlete, clarifying why they are correcting an athlete, and helping the athlete make their own individualized plan of how to overcome their shortcomings. Essentially, autonomy-supportive coaching seeks to help the student-athlete to feel that they are listened to, cared for, and respected.

Continuing further, Felton and Jowett (2013) list three basic needs of all athletes that promote well-being: autonomy, competency, and relatedness (feeling connected). Autonomy-supportive coaching

192

styles were found to fulfill all three of these basic needs and were found to be significantly and positively correlated with increased well-being and decreased social anxiety in athletes (Felton & Jowett, 2013). For example, an athlete with anxiety may feel less anxious to receive correction from a coach in private as opposed to receiving correction in front of others. Autonomous-supporting coaches may be more aware of athletes with social anxiety, seek to understand their situation better, and help ease them into social interactions amongst the team (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Thus, autonomous-supportive coaching styles may promote stronger coach–athlete relationships, which can lead to increased well-being and lower levels of social anxiety in student-athletes.

Servant Leadership

Although not widely used in the sports world today, servant leadership, a branch of autonomous-supportive leadership, may be a beneficial coaching style in order to reduce social anxiety in high school student-athletes. Greenleaf (2002) defines a servant leader as someone who puts the needs, goals, and interests of others above their own and whose goal is to support those who are under their leadership. Accordingly, attributes of a leader with this style of coaching would likely include humility, empathy, caring, and being observant. In greater depth, central characteristics of servant leadership include empathy, emotional healing, awareness, building up the community, empowering those they lead, putting others first, helping others to grow and succeed, and behaving ethically (Greenleaf, 2002; Kim et al., 2018; Leffler, 1999). For example, Greenleaf (2002) suggests that servant leaders help to foster emotional recovery through empathizing with and tolerating imperfections in their athletes, and that the facet of building up the community can also provide student-athletes with skills to cope with their social anxiety. Specifically, coaches who have adopted this style of leadership may serve their athletes while simultaneously teaching their athletes to serve those around them. MacIlvaine, Nelson, Stewart, and Stewart (2014) found that routine participation in service can lead to increased well-being and a decrease in feelings of anxiety in the general population. Thus,

193

coaches may choose to provide service opportunities for their athletes, including sanctioned community service projects (i.e. serving food at a local soup kitchen, running a clothing drive, or planting flowers in local parks) or anonymous acts of service for teammates, family, peers, or their school.

Conclusion

Because the autonomy-supportive model is relatively new, it has not yet been tested in an athletic setting. Despite this, researchers have noticed improvements in business settings when autonomous-supportive and servant-leadership styles have been utilized. More research should be done specifically on the effectiveness of autonomous-supporting leadership in high school sports. Training high school coaches on autonomous-supportive coaching styles and how to give corrective feedback to athletes with anxiety could help alleviate the anxiety of student athletes across the country.

For student-athletes trying to overcome social anxiety, a coach aiding in their emotional healing through empathy and awareness may be beneficial. Nevertheless, autonomous-supportive and servant-leadership styles do not come naturally to everyone, and there are currently minimal leadership requirements or training required for high school coaches in the United States (NFHS, 2020). Dierendonck & Patterson (2019) provide an example of a possible leadership training program that involves the implementation of four steps. The steps include developing the ability to create a compelling vision, to align desires and talents with the leadership position, to recognize that as leaders they are stewards (and can delegate some of that stewardship to others), and to become role models. The four steps can be carried out through the use of various trainings, personalized vision statements and development plans, and having a mentor periodically monitor and improve leadership development. In conclusion, school districts or states may choose to offer or require servant-leadership training (such as, but not limited to, the four-step program mentioned above), which could provide high school coaches with the resources needed to develop servant-leadership attributes.

194

Thus, coaches could become better suited to work with and support student-athletes who suffer from social anxiety.

References

American Psychiatric Association (APA) (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5 (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc.

Ashdown-Franks, G., Sabiston, C. M., Solomon-Krakus, S., & O'Loughlin, J. L. (2017). Sport participation in high school and anxiety symptoms in young adulthood. Mental Health and Physical Activity, 12, 19–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhpa.2016.12.001

Bandelow, B., & Michaelis, S. (2015). Epidemiology of anxiety disorders in the 21st century. Dialogues in clinical neuroscience, 17(3), 327–335.

Boivin, M., Hymel, S., & Bukowski, W. M. (1995). The roles of social withdrawal, peer rejection, and victimization by peers in predicting loneliness and depressed mood in childhood. Development and Psychopathology, 7(4), 765–785.

Caraway, K., Tucker, C. M., Reinke, W. M., & Hall, C. (2003). Self-efficacy, goal orientation and fear of failure as predictors of school engagement in high school students. Psychology in the Schools, 40(4), 417–427.

Cohen, M., Buzinski, S. G., Armstrong-Carter, E., Clark, J., Buck, B., & Reuman, L. (2019). Think, pair, freeze: The association between social anxiety and student discomfort in the active learning environment. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 5(4), 265–277. https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000147

Craft, L. L., Magyar, T. M., Becker, B. J., & Feltz, D. L. (2003). The relationship between the competitive state anxiety inventory-2 and sport performance: A meta-analysis. Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 25(1), 44–65.

de Lijster, J. M., Dierckx, B., Utens, E. M. W. J., Verhulst, F. C., Zieldorff, C., Dieleman, G. C., & Legerstee, J. S. (2017). The age of onset of anxiety disorders: A meta-analysis. The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry / La Revue Canadienne de Psychiatrie, 62(4), 237–246.

de Lijster, J. M., Dieleman, G. C., Utens, E. M. W. J., Dierckx, B., Wierenga, M., Verhulst, F. C., & Legerstee, J. S. (2018). Social and academic functioning in adolescents with anxiety disorders: A systematic review. Journal of Affective Disorders, 230, 108–117.

Dimech, A. S., & Seiler, R. (2011). Extra-curricular sport participation: A potential buffer against social anxiety symptoms in primary school children. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 12(4), 347–354.

195

Put the Score on the Back Burner

Dryman, M. T., Gardner, S., Weeks, J. W., & Heimberg, R. G. (2016). Social anxiety disorder and quality of life: How fears of negative and positive evaluation relate to specific domains of life satisfaction. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 38*, 1–8.

Egger, H. L., Costello, E. J., & Angold, A. (2003). School refusal and psychiatric disorders: A community study. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 42(7), 797–807.

Erath, S. A., Flanagan, K. S., & Bierman, K. L. (2007). Social anxiety and peer relations in early adolescence: Behavioral and cognitive factors. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 35(3), 405–416.

Felton, L., & Jowett, S. (2013). 'What do coaches do' and 'how do they relate': Their effects on athletes' psychological needs and functioning. Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, 23(2), 139.

Gomes, A. R., Faria, S., & Vilela, C. (2017). Anxiety and burnout in young athletes: The mediating role of cognitive appraisal. Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, 27(12), 2116–2126.

Greenleaf, R. K. (2002). Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness, 25th anniversary ed. (L. C. Spears, Ed.). Paulist Press.

Inderbitzen-Nolan, H. M., Anderson, E. R., & Johnson, H. S. (2007). Subjective versus objective behavioral ratings following two analogue tasks: A comparison of socially phobic and non-anxious adolescents. Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 21(1), 76–90.

Idsoe, T., Dyregrov, A., & Idsoe, E. C. (2012). Bullying and PTSD symptoms. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 40(6), 901–911.

Jefferson, J. W. (2001). Social anxiety disorder: More than just a little shyness. Primary Care Companion to the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 3(1), 4–9.

Kim, M., Kim, Y., & Won, D. (2018). From commanding to serving athletes: Nurturing the coach–athlete relationship. International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching, 13(6), 891–901.

Leffler, K. L. (1999). Review of Insights on leadership: Service, stewardship, spirit, and servant-leadership. Journal of Leadership Studies, 5(3), 167–169.

MacIlvaine, W. R., Nelson, L. A., Stewart, J. A., & Stewart, W. C. (2014). Association of strength of community service to personal wellbeing. Community Mental Health Journal, 50(5), 577–582.

Mouratidis, A., Lens, W., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2010). How you provide corrective feedback makes a difference: The motivating role of communicating in an autonomy-supporting way. Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 32(5), 619–637.

196

National Institute of Mental Health. (2017, November). Any anxiety disorder. https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder.shtml

Ranta, K., Kaltiala-Heino, R., Rantanen, P., & Marttunen, M. (2009). Social phobia in Finnish general adolescent population: Prevalence, comorbidity, individual and family correlates and service use. Depression and Anxiety, 26(6), 528–536.

Reichenberger, J., Wiggert, N., Wilhelm, F. H., Liedlgruber, M., Voderholzer, U., Hillert, A., . . . Blechert, J. (2019). Fear of negative and positive evaluation and reactivity to social-evaluative videos in social anxiety disorder. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 116, 140–148.

Steinberg, L., & Morris, A. S. (2001). Adolescent development. Annual Review of Psychology, 52(1), 83–110.

The National Federation of State High School Associations. (2020). Fundamentals of coaching. https://nfhslearn.com/courses/fundamentals-of-coaching

Turner, B. G., Beidel, D. C., Hughes, S., & Turner, M. W. (1993). Text anxiety in African American school children. School Psychology Quarterly, 8(2), 140–152.

Toldson, I. A., & McGee, T. (2014). What the ACT and SAT mean for Black students' higher education prospects: Editor's commentary. Journal of Negro Education, 83(1), 1–3.

Van Dierendonck, D., Patterson, K. (Eds.) (2019) Practicing Servant Leadership: Developments in implementation. Palgrave Macmillan.

Van Zalk, N., Tillfors, M., & Trost, K. (2018). Mothers' and fathers' worry and over-control: One step closer to understanding early adolescent social anxiety. Child Psychiatry and Human Development, 49(6), 917–927.

Weeks, J. W., Heimberg, R. G., Rodebaugh, T. L., Goldin, P. R., & Gross, J. J. (2012).

Psychometric evaluation of the fear of positive evaluation scale in patients with

social anxiety disorder. Psychological Assessment, 24(2), 301–312.

Weymouth, B. B., & Buehler, C. (2018). Early adolescents' relationships with parents, teachers, and peers and increases in social anxiety symptoms. Journal of Family Psychology, 32(4), 496–506.

Woodman, T., & Hardy, L. (2003). The relative impact of cognitive anxiety and self-confidence upon sport performance: A meta-analysis. Journal of Sports Sciences, 21(6), 443–457.

197