The Coach-created Motivational Climate in Professional Football

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate how three Italian professional coaches who have coached at the highest level of European football (Serie A in Italy) motivate their players. Specific attention was given to the type of motivational climate that the coach tries to create as well as the importance of the relationship between the player and coach and the subsequent effect on motivational levels. Therefore, the study looked to provide further insight into the importance of the player-coach relationship in accordance with the self-determination theory. The study employed a qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data was analysed utilizing a thematic analysis approach. The findings of the study show that even at the highest levels of professional football, coaches look to create a mastery motivational climate. The importance of a strong player-connection built on mutual trust, respect, and effective feedback was an underpinning theme throughout the study. Showing empathy, providing the perception of choice, and initiative-taking opportunities as well as a rationale for tasks were some of the methods through which the coaches tried to increase their players’ perception of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Keywords: Intrinsic motivation; self-determination theory; player-coach relationship; feedback

Introduction

Optimal performance in any competitive sporting domain demands continuous effort and dedication coupled with a relentless desire to strive to improve. This drive has often been referred to as motivation (Vallerand 2007). To stay on track, athletes need to remain focused and motivated towards achieving their goals. Any decline in motivational levels may lead to adverse effects on their performance. In fact, motivational levels have been directly related to positive sports performance (Jowett, Shanmugam and Caccoulis 2012). It seems reasonable to suggest that higher levels of athlete motivation may lead to a higher probability of experiencing successful sporting performance. Therefore, understanding motivation—and the role the coach plays in enhancing it—is pivotal to initiating and maintaining levels of motivation among athletes.

Research in social psychology has shown that interactions between individuals can have a noteworthy impact on one’s thoughts and feelings and indeed directly influence behaviour and motivational levels (Gilbert, Fiske and Lindzey 1998). In line with this, research (Reinboth and Duda 2006; Ryan and Deci 2000) has highlighted the importance of a significant other, such as a coach, in motivating people into action. The established relationship between the athlete and coach, which is a direct result of the experienced interactions between both parties, may have a direct impact on athletes’ motivational
levels (Amorose 2007). Anything that the coach does within the coaching context can increase or decrease such motivational levels. Based on this premise, it seems plausible to contend that the relationship between the coach and athlete plays a pivotal role in enhancing (or diminishing) motivational levels as “motivation is pivotal to initiating and maintaining others to act in various contexts” (Mallett 2005: 417). So much so that Mageau and Vallerand (2003) even went on to state that “the actions of coaches might be one of the most critical motivational influences in sport” (Lachini, Amorose and Anderson-Butcher 2010: 292).

Recognising the important influence that the coach may have on motivational levels, it is the aim of this study to examine this further. Specifically, the study will look to provide further insight into the importance of the coach-athlete relationship and how (and even why) high-level professional football coaches look to maximise the benefits of their actions to maintain and even enhance both relationships and motivational levels of their athletes. In addition, despite all the research suggesting the importance of an autonomy-supportive coaching style (Deci and Ryan 2002), to date, very little is known regarding the extent to which current high-level professional football coaches in Europe are heeding this advice. This study seeks to investigate whether the implicit theories guiding coaches’ practices and the resultant motivational strategies they implement are consistent with self-determination theory (SDT). Indeed, the study will seek to ask and understand whether coaches are deliberately attempting to construct particular climates and, if so, what type of climate they want to create and why, as well as what role the coach-athlete relationship is playing in all of this? Ultimately, do the strategies used by coaches to motivate their athletes conform to the idea that motivation will be maximized when the athletes’ basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied as proposed in SDT? If so, what specific actions are coaches taking to satisfy each need?

**Method**

**Data Collection**

Gratton and Jones (2004: 140) pointed out how the simplest way to find out information from someone is simply to ask them. As such, semi-structured interviews with the three participants were conducted to collect the data which most relevant to the research question. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The relatively small sample size is in line with what Kvale (1996: 103) suggested to generate rich data, as many research projects would benefit from fewer interviews and better preparation and analysis. Furthermore, such a qualitative approach permits examination of strategies and tactics that may not appear in the coaching literature (Lachini, Amorose and Anderson-Butcher 2010: 293).

The pre-set core questions were intended to steer the interview towards a general direction or agenda whilst at the same time allowing the participant the space to provide insight and original thought without being over-directed, which allows for a more spontaneous and rich data set (Willig 2008: 24). The questions were related to the type of motivational climate that the coach looks to create and how the coach perceives its influence on player motivation. For example, “Do you believe that the training environment can affect the motivational levels of the players? How so?” In addition, the questions looked to investigate what the coach does to foster the player’s intrinsic motivation and satisfy their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Questions such as: “Do you encourage players to make suggestions regarding practice sessions, game tactics, or strategies?” (autonomy); “How do you help the team deal with setbacks like losing matches? What do you say or do to keep the team motivated?” (competence); “Do you
feel that your interactions with players change depending on the results being achieved?” (relatedness).

Participants

Given the specific nature of the study, purposeful sampling was used to identify three Italian male expert coaches who had held professional coaching employment with elite adult teams at the highest level of their domestic league i.e., the Italian Serie A. The participants were between 46 and 61 years of age ($M=54.3$, $SD=6.24$). All the participants were selected based on their extensive knowledge and experience of the area being investigated (Rubin and Rubin 1995). The three coaches had a combined total of 74 years of professional coaching experience with a total of 40 clubs (two of which were national teams). Individually, their coaching experience ranged between 16 years and 38 years ($M=24.6$, $SD=9.56$). Furthermore, to aid their recollection of their experiences, the chosen coaches had to still be directly involved in coaching within the last 5 years. In terms of the small sample size, the emphasis here is placed on the fact that these participants are considered, as Baker and Edwards (2012) term it, “elites” and thus it is fair to suggest that a sufficiently rich and deep understanding of the issues presented would be gleaned and consequently analysed from the data retrieved from these experienced participants (Baker and Edwards 2021).

Procedures

Upon ethical approval, the participants were contacted via email. The e-mail gave a brief description of the aim of the study and the importance of their participation was outlined. The participants were also assured that their participation was voluntary and duly evidenced their informed consent. Once this consent was granted, the participants agreed to conduct an online one-to-one semi-structured interview. The recorded interviews lasted between 35 and 55 minutes. The participants were assigned the unique pseudonyms of David, Mark, and Carl to ensure anonymity. The complete interview transcripts were e-mailed to the participants to ensure they constituted accurate representations of their responses during the interviews. Upon confirmation, the transcripts were used to begin the data analysis phase.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis (TA) approach was adopted to analyse the interviews. Thematic analysis has been identified to work well with qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews which are aimed at “gathering in-depth accounts of personal experience” (Braun, Clarke and Weate 2017: 193). The six phases of TA, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), were adopted in this study, namely, familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, producing a report. Although there is a tendency towards a linear application of these six phases, during the TA used in this study, a process of moving back and forth through the six phases was adopted. This approach enabled the identification and categorization of raw data into lower and higher-order themes which were embedded with the participants’ responses in relation to the research question.
Results and Discussion

The Player-Coach Relationship

Jowett (2017) claimed that a key factor to successful outcomes in coaching is based on the quality of the relationship built between coaches and athletes. Both Carl and David concur with this thought path in so much as they agree that the coach-player relationship is the key to the group’s overall success. Trust and respect are nurtured over time, creating a type of familial bond between the players and the coach that increases the feeling of shared responsibility.

Building Trust and Respect

David suggests that showing the players that they have the coach’s confidence is a key factor in achieving this. When the coach demonstrates that he has confidence in his players, this may be portrayed as a show of trust. Once players believe that they have their coach’s trust, they are more likely to play with confidence and heart as they are more relaxed and focused (Lynch 2001).

The words and actions of the coach are a manifestation of his character. So, if a coach wants his players’ trust, he must demonstrate that he is a trustworthy person. One way of demonstrating trustworthiness is based on being honest. David believes that “honesty is always the best way to build a healthy relationship with the players”. Being honest entails that the coach should not promise things that he cannot deliver. Promising something to a player and not following through on that promise will be viewed as a “crack in the dam of a coach’s character” (Lynch 2001: 4). These cracks can be very dangerous. The integrity of the coach’s character will be questioned, and an evident lack of trust will follow. Mark asserts that this lack of trust, and indeed even respect, will have a detrimental impact on the effectiveness of the coach. If a coach deceives the players in any way, this will lead to the degradation of the relationship between them and his technical and tactical knowledge will diminish in value. The bond created will, in effect, be “cracked” and some players may even seek to take advantage of this diminished respect by plotting against the coach, especially when players that feel aggrieved are concerned (Lynch 2001: 4).

On the other hand, when coaches are honest and trustworthy, the players feel that they have a better connection with the coach and their basic psychological need of relatedness is satisfied which in turn leads to higher levels of intrinsic motivation. With this increase in intrinsic motivation, players also become more receptive of coach feedback (Bennie and O’Connor 2012) which enables more effective coaching. In order to connect and correct players more effectively, Mark explains that it is important to understand all the characters in the group. Ultimately, when coaching effectiveness is maximised, a higher probability of player development may be expected which may only lead to increasing the players’ perception of competence. In the end, mutual trust and respect have an important impact on high-level performance. When players are treated with respect, they will be more motivated to give their best efforts as they experience a sense of loyalty and relatedness to their coach (Bennie and O’Connor 2012).

Showing Empathy

Showing empathy goes a long way towards building or maintaining players’ trust and respect. David defines empathy as “the ability to look at the world through the eyes of another”. When a coach does this, he is showing a genuine interest not only in the player but also, and perhaps more importantly, he is showing an interest in the person. Jones et al. (2004) and Potrac et al. (2002) established that when a coach demonstrates such
an interest in getting to know the person behind the player, apart from increasing their confidence, trust and even loyalty are also gained. This may be the reason why the coaches in this study all described how they value the importance of getting to know their players on a personal level. For Carl, getting to know each individual player thoroughly can increase the coach’s sensibility in terms of how he interacts on a personal level with each player. Such interactions help the coach to get a better understanding of the uniqueness of his players and ultimately help to build a stronger relationship. These interactions with the player may not only help the coach to understand the player better, but as Carl suggests, they also may shed light on any personal issues that the player may be going through. Mark concurs in so much as he states that if external factors affecting a player remain unknown to the coach, then performance may be affected without apparent justification; the relationship between player and coach is then at risk of diminishing due to a lack of understanding between the pair. The coach will not understand the player and likewise the player will feel aggrieved at the coach’s decisions (Jones et al. 2004; Potrac et al. 2002).

For such interactions to take place, not only must the coach be open to them, but the player must be able to perceive that the coach would be willing to listen and even care for what he has to say. Aware of this, David adopts an open-door policy and ensures his players understand he is approachable. Such a quality is appealing to players as it promotes communication which is much attuned to developing the player-coach relationship. By simply providing the opportunity to be heard, he sends the message that the player (or person) is valued and is deserving of the coach’s time. More importantly however, is that when a player comes to him with any personal issue, the coach must be truly willing to help to reinforce the trust bond that is developed by this open communication policy (Jones et al. 2004; Potrac et al. 2002). As David asserts, not only does the coach encourage players to communicate with him, but furthermore, when they do, his actions show that he can relate and empathize with the players’ situation, building the players’ trust, respect, and loyalty in the process. All these values contribute to intrinsically motivate the players. However, he also expresses a tone of caution in this respect. It is important not to intrude into a player’s personal life but to make sure that the player feels that he can come to him with external issues. If a player underperforms, then the coach has every right to ask if the player is alright but if the player fails to open up, then there is nothing the coach can do further until he does. Mark agrees with this approach entirely and for the same reason. Here the coaches are demonstrating a level of interpersonal knowledge. If a coach pushes too much, even if his intentions are genuinely fueled by his desire to help, the adverse effect of overstepping the boundaries may be experienced by the player. So, in line with the suggestion by Lynch (2001: 64), perhaps coaches should tread carefully and discuss “personal issues only when initiated by the athlete”.

Professional Relationship - Distinguish the Player from the Person

Taking an interest and investing time to develop the relationship with players does not mean that a coach will do whatever it takes to befriend his players. Such an approach must not be confused with a permissive interpersonal style (Baumrind 1991), wherein coaches would get caught up in trying to constantly please their players. In line with previous research (Cassidy et al. 2004; Côté and Sedgwick 2003), David and Mark both agree that a coach must build up a relationship as described but not become their players’ best friend. The coach and the player must retain a level of professionalism in their relationship, developing mutual trust, respect, and loyalty so that at all times the coach may make professional, objective decisions about and for a player that are in the best interests of the team and the player alike. Mark asserted that the match-day decisions he makes are influenced only by what is best for the team, not by the personal relationship he has with the players concerned.
It is important to understand at this point that picking a player for professional reasons is professional and correct, and that the relationship a coach has with each player cannot and should not be determined entirely by a player’s performance level. When a coach bases the quality of his relationship purely on such factors, the player is bound to perceive such a relationship to be an egoistic one as the coach only takes interest in those players that can give him something on the field of play. In such situations, the coach’s interest is not driven by a genuine desire to help the player (and person) develop, but rather to use the players’ performance to satisfy his own need for personal glory. Players will pick up on this and will feel that their basic psychological need of relatedness is being stifled as they believe that they are being used as a means to an end. Indeed, such an approach is a form of psychological control as the player will understand that the relationship with the coach will only be good when he performs well. When he does not, the coach will induce a sense of guilt by withdrawing from the relationship and providing less care and attention to the player. Such an insidious form of control would jeopardize the players’ intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivation (SDEM) (Mageau and Vallerand 2003). On the other hand, strong, loyal, and lasting relationships are built when both parties look to help each other through difficult times as they can acknowledge the other’s importance (Lynch 2001). When coaches look to invest in the relationship with the person, especially when their performance is not optimal, then both the person and the player will eventually strive further, as players who feel cared for are more inclined to invest their energies towards developing a positive relationship with their coach (Jowett and Shanmugam 2016), resulting in higher levels of intrinsic motivation and resilience.

Dealing with Players Who Are Not Playing

When players lose their place in the starting formation, their confidence and motivation may be adversely affected. During such moments, these players will feel that they have failed to successfully do what they love doing and hence their sense of competence will diminish. Not being picked to start a game may understandably be perceived as the coach's lack of belief in the player. Dealing with such players is not an easy task as it may have a toll on the player-coach relationship. Every player in the team is important but all the coaches in this study justified how they tend to treat certain players differently so that they may remain motivated. The importance of the players who do not play is asserted by all three coaches in so much as they all take it upon themselves to ensure that they work directly with the players concerned in training soon after a game. This can help instill and reinforce the feeling of importance that each player internalizes and helps them improve in a particular aspect that was deemed to be lacking (Jowett, Shanmugam and Caccoulis 2012). This is achieved by the coach demonstrating, through this kind of behaviour, that they are important to the squad and that the coach wants them to improve. The coach dedicating time to those who have not played is seen by the players as inclusive and positive behaviour and will inevitably lead to their improving and thus raising their chances of being called to play. The player will be better positioned then to help and assist the team. For Jowett and Cockerill (2003) when a coach is successful at enhancing player performance, the relationship between the player and coach also improves, which fulfils the players’ basic psychological need of relatedness and hence an increase in intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 2002). Jowett, Shanmugam and Caccoulis (2012) show that when there is a positive connection between the player and the coach, players are more likely to view this coach as being an effective one and, in turn, they will arguably be more inclined to follow and be motivated to work with coaches whom they feel can help them become better at their trade—even if that means that they are not in the starting eleven.
Providing Choice and Initiative-taking Opportunities

Many studies have shown the importance of providing choice (Cordova and Lepper 1996; Dwyer 1995; Thompson and Wankel 1980) as well as creating opportunities to take the initiative (e.g. Deci, Connell and Ryan 1989) and the positive effect that such approaches bring about in increasing athletes’ intrinsic motivation. In concordance with such studies, Mark believes that so long as there is respect for the coach’s role, players need to be provided with opportunities to not only speak their minds but also, and perhaps more importantly, to have their opinions seriously taken into consideration when decisions need to be taken. Mark likes to discuss situations with the players, giving them a sense of ownership of and responsibility for the problem and the solution. Furthermore, when coaches encourage players to express their thoughts, in the process of doing so, players may even provide solutions that the coach may not have considered. Mark asserts that players see the game from a different perspective, as they live the reality, so to speak, thus their interpretations of the event may be different to the coach’s touchline view. Whilst the coach makes the decision, taking counsel from the players is a wise step.

Providing players with such opportunities feeds their desire to be autonomous which increases the players’ perception of competence as it enables them to experience a sense of self-determination. Even though he acknowledges that perhaps many will disagree with him, David prefers to take a more coach-centred approach. He explained how he does not appreciate coaches who give “too much responsibility to the player”. When questioned on the importance of players feeling autonomous, he explained that he prefers to give instruction based on his preference in terms of how he wants the game played. He suggests that this approach facilitates team cohesion as it does not leave any grey areas of interpretation, especially regarding the defensive phase of the game where there are specific rules which everyone must follow. He leaves the players in no doubt as to what he wants in all situations. However, David does ask for his player’s input at times. Once he has provided the players with a specific option, he may ask questions such as “What do you think? Do you agree with this? Do you have another opinion?” Apart from trying to understand if the players have understood what the coach is asking of them, the primary motive behind David’s questioning is not so much as trying to satisfy their need to feel autonomous as suggested by SDT, but rather to enforce his own beliefs. He further suggests that allowing them this say will help them see that their way would not work and thus reinforces his initial position. Carl takes a similar approach as he explains how he would listen to player suggestions so long as the player’s suggestions make sense in terms of how what they say fits into his ideas of how football should be played.

These revelations seem to strengthen the traditional authoritarian settings associated with football coaching environments in which the power and knowledge rest primarily with the coach. However, at this point, an important distinction must be made. Being autonomous does not equate to being free to do as one pleases. In the context of team sports such as football, autonomy may be defined as one’s ability to volitionally act in accordance with a certain set of group values. In this regard, football players may still depend on their coach to provide the answers but at the same time still be autonomous in their actions (Memmi 1984). When players value their coach’s knowledge and competence highly, they may volitionally (and autonomously) choose to let the coach make the strategic tactical decisions whilst still feel self-determined in the process (Mageau and Vallerand 2003). This may explain why all the coaches in this study felt that it was very important for them to assert their knowledge of the game with their players. David asserts that players can tell within five minutes if the coach knows what he is talking about in each situation. Thus, it is important to ensure that what the coach delivers is well-considered and understood, thereby protecting the player’s trust and respect for the coach. Mark agreed in the sense that he maintains that it is fundamental to the player-coach relationship that the coach...
The coach's body language, what he says and even how he says it, are all a means of feedback that the player will inevitably interpret. When the coach provides feedback which undermines the player or in some way induces feelings of guilt, then both intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivational levels may be jeopardized. Conversely, if positive, non-controlling competence feedback is provided, then the players' intrinsic motivational levels are more likely to grow (Mageau and Vallerand 2003). Carl discovered that it is important
to help the players learn; hammering them for mistakes creates a negative reaction and atmosphere. Encouragement is what is required during tough moments. Mark agrees, and his experience has led him to be the coach he is today, but both are aware that reflective practice is important if a coach is to make the best of the experiences they had in their earlier years (Côté and Gilbert 2009). Both Carl and Mark were able to transform their previous knowledge by recognising faults and attuning their approach. They realised that when the feedback they provided, in some way or another, undermined the player, the process of development was prolonged. On the other hand, when they utilised encouragement and concentrated on the positives, the process of development was accelerated. Carl attributed this acceleration in development as the key towards the motivational levels of the players. A decrease in motivation will lead to a decrease in effort. It is a downward spiral in effect and form is affected. However, when a player is motivated properly in tough times, the player will overcome and gain in strength, character, and knowledge. Therefore, the coach needs to cultivate courage amongst his players by giving them the freedom to fail and encouraging them to overcome.

The underlying message here is that through the use and type of feedback being utilised, the coach will look to maintain and even increase player motivation by working on their confidence to develop more courage in the players. In agreement with Lynch (2001) who suggested that effective communication between the player and coach may help foster player confidence, Carl considers the starting point in maintaining and improving the players’ motivational level is highly co-related to improving their confidence through effective communication. Effective communication can only be achieved when the messages being delivered are clear and easy to understand. Effective communication does not mean that the coach should not correct the player when errors are made. When a coach simply points out the mistake, he would fall far short in the fulfillment of that role. As David asserts, it is in knowing how and when that success is achieved. Indeed, identifying faults in performance is one of the key roles of a coach and without the coaches’ feedback, players may lack the necessary knowledge to progress. Both Carl and Mark agree that honesty, encouragement, and supportive feedback is required when a player makes mistakes. For David, effective communication requires that potential issues are dealt with quickly, face to face. This can mean that disagreements might occur, as tackling the issue in the heat of the moment can be emotive. However, the resolution is important so that the problem does not escalate.

Yet, even though the coaches agree that effective communication needs to derive from honest interactions between the player and coach, Carl admits that when dealing with players who are low on confidence, he may sometimes tell the player what they want to hear because he needs the player to get back on track and refocus on the game situation. The way he does this can help them enormously; it is about effective player management. In other words, the coach here is trying to improve the self-efficacy of his players. Self-efficacy does not refer to the actual ability of the player, but rather to the players' belief or perception about what he can achieve with his skill set (Boardley 2018). In the end, all coaches communicate with their players in one way or another. However, as the coaches have explained, effective coaches will communicate better by being honest with their players and putting a greater emphasis on positive reinforcement. They will reward the process rather than the outcome and they will do all they can to improve the players’ sense of self-efficacy which will inevitably increase self-confidence and intrinsic motivation as it satisfies the basic psychological need of competence (Deci and Ryan 1985).

Coaching Style – Authoritative vs Authoritarian

Much of what has been discussed thus far sheds light on the type of coaching style adopted by the participants of this study. Nevertheless, when asked explicitly to describe their coaching style, both David and Mark believe that they adopt an authoritative rather
than an authoritarian approach. The authoritative coaching style is more akin to a mastery motivational climate as it tends to be more autonomy-supportive whereas the authoritarian style would be more controlling and coach-centered. However, David also pointed out that a coach may be authoritarian in certain situations, but such instances should be the exception and not the rule as using it as a long-term strategy can be detrimental. Mark agreed with this sentiment in the sense that too much shouting can be demotivational. It is necessary on occasion but, as a rule, motivation is derived from encouragement.

A study by Becker (2009), which involved 18 elite athletes from a variety of sports, looked to determine greatness in coaching. The participants in that study shared the views expressed by both Mark and David. They explained how their “great” coaches were able to grab their attention by a variety of approaches, including shouting and speaking softly, using analogies and stories, or even by saying controversial things (Becker 2009: 108). They also went on to state how they even preferred a coach who would provide negative feedback (in moderation) as opposed to no feedback at all. Similarly, Anderson et al. (1976) suggest that a lack of involvement from figures of authority (like coaches and parents) was perceived as being worse than when controlling behaviours were exhibited. Once again, as has been previously highlighted, the interpersonal knowledge of the coach plays a big part in understanding which approach will work best, with whom and when. Indeed, for Mark, the coach needs to be able to read the moment and act accordingly. Similarly, David recalled what Arrigo Sacchi once told him in the sense that the sensibility of the coach is what separates a good coach from a bad one. An intuitive knowledge of what the player specifically needs in that specific moment is what makes a coach truly successful.

In highly competitive sports such as football, stress levels are often very elevated as the stakes are high. Just as players feel pressure to perform, so do coaches. Research has shown that when individuals experience pressure to perform and are under high levels of stress, they are more likely to exhibit controlling behaviors. Coaches know that their jobs are directly dependent on the team’s performance and results. In such situations, coaches may probably become more ego-involved as they look to survive. In doing so, they are more likely to exhibit controlling behaviours (Deci et al. 1982) akin to an authoritarian coaching style as the stress depletes their psychological resources, crippling their ability to consider others’ perspectives. For Mark, a coach should be able to perform under pressure by keeping a balance. His behaviour should not go to extremes in reaction to good or bad times, keeping emotional equilibrium, and a constant approach to training and the group, regardless of results.

Unfortunately, monitoring the amount of controlling, authoritarian behaviours that a coach exhibits is easier said than done. Smith and Smoll (1996) demonstrated how coaches have very limited awareness of the frequency of their engagement in particular forms of behaviour as low and even non-significant correlations were found between the coaches’ self-reports and those of observers. Therefore, coaches need to acquire an increased awareness of how they behave as well as a better understanding of the circumstances under which they are more likely to become more authoritarian than authoritative.

**Conclusion**

The findings of the study indicate that even at the highest levels of professional football, where competition and the fight to survive and thrive is prevalent, coaches look to create a mastery motivational climate.
The importance of a strong player-coach connection built on mutual trust and respect was an underpinning theme throughout the study. This trust and respect need to be earned by the coach, primarily by showing that he is a trustworthy person. Among the important factors for enhancing the player-coach connection was the coach’s ability to demonstrate genuine care for the players, being honest, showing empathy, and taking the time to get to know the person behind the player. During difficult times, coaches need to be even closer to their players. At the same time, the coaches in the study strongly recommended the importance of keeping a professional relationship with the players and setting clear boundaries. Apart from providing positive, non-controlling competence feedback, setbacks need to be viewed as opportunities to develop. Providing clear, consistent messages and tackling issues early on were identified to ensure effective feedback which would also improve player confidence and satisfy the players’ basic psychological needs of competence and relatedness.

Providing players with the prospect of choice and initiative-taking opportunities was identified as an effective means to increase the player’s perception of autonomy. However, in this regard, the coaches in this study demonstrated a more coach-centred approach. To gain more credibility and compliance from their players, the coaches looked to assert their knowledge of the game; this has been shown in previous literature to be an effective approach, encouraging players to volitionally surrender their need to feel autonomous. Finally, an authoritative rather than an authoritarian coaching style was suggested to be the predominant approach that coaches should adopt. However, coaches need to have good sensibility not only when it comes to their players’ emotional states but also their own. Triggers such as stress and pressure may push the coach towards a more authoritarian coaching style and so coaches need to acquire an increased awareness of how they behave as well as a better understanding of the circumstances under which they are more likely to become more authoritarian than authoritative.

Recommendations for Local Practice

In view of this study’s findings, it is important to consider how these ideas may be introduced through coach education and wider discussion at a local level. Many coaches operating within the Maltese football pyramid have a results-based attitude to coaching and development. This attitude may be an enforced one emanating from the expectation created by ambitious chairmen and committees. This is, however, an erroneous attitude to the development of football players as results do not always demonstrate successful development. As this study reveals, top Italian football coaches take time to create a mastery motivational climate. They build a nurturing and encouraging environment that creates a relationship between coach and player that demonstrates trust and respect through authoritative leadership, allowing players to learn, understand and apply their learning and the results to follow. If this positive style of player management and coaching is good enough for professional coaches in one of Europe’s most successful leagues, then it is appropriate and correct that Maltese coaches should seek to adapt their style similarly for the future of Maltese football. Unfortunately, there is very little current research available in the local context, apart from an in-depth study by Kerr-Cumbo (2011) which focused on the perceptions of youth footballers and their coaches’ relating to the coach’s behaviours. This lack of research on the professional game locally needs to be addressed. Indeed, this important matter should be taken up by the MFA’s coach education department with the aim of engaging with further research on this subject area so as to be able to provide the necessary education programmes for the inclusion of this style of management.
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