

COACHING MASTERS DRAGON BOATERS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A COACH AND AN ATHLETE

Dr. Bettina Callary¹, Justin MacLellan², Scott Rathwell², Dr. Bradley W. Young²

¹Cape Breton University, Canada

²University of Ottawa, Canada



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Happen.

Masters Athletes (MAs)

MAs are 35 years of age or older, formally enrolled in a sporting event or club, and acknowledge that they regularly train in preparation for competition (Young, 2011)

In a coached context, MAs have a wide variety of motives for sport involvement, past experiences in their sport, and perspectives on competition and how they prefer to be coached (Rathwell, Callary, & Young, 2015)

MAs with coaches noted swimming and non-swimming related benefits in having a coach (Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2015)

MAs with coaches wanted coaches to:

- have experience and knowledge
- hold them accountable
- plan and structure their training
- support them at competition (Callary et al., 2015)

Purpose

To explore the match between what a female Masters dragon boat racer wants and needs from a coach, and what a female dragon boat coach working with MAs does with her team.

Method

Participants:

- Female dragon boat racer, aged 58, engaged in this sport as youth and MA;
- Female dragon boat coach, aged 22, engaged in this sport as youth; coaching MAs for 6 years, undergraduate degree in kinesiology, graduate training in sport psychology
- Both compete internationally but with different clubs in different cities

Data collection:

- One semi-structured interview with each individual separately, each 2 hours in duration and conducted one year apart

Data analysis:

- Thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- Read 50 pages of participant transcripts – allowed for understanding of convergence and divergence of data
- Line-by-line analysis
- Inductive analysis into themes
- Themes vetted three ways by research team

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Results – Five Themes

1. Who are MAs? Understanding the highly successful professional character MAs bring with them from outside of sport.

Athlete: MAs have families, professions, they’re very successful. The coach has to respect that he’s talking to a person who has achieved a lot in life. MAs are confident, they’re at a high skill level. They want to train and compete at a high level. I like to train, I like to stay fit. I like the challenge. I really like goals in my life and it’s also a nice place to socialize with people who have common interests. This is an environment where I have all that.

Coach: I love coaching MAs because I know they want to be there. They're not being forced by anybody. I’m able to get a lot more out of somebody who wants to be there. They all are accomplished and they all have so much to bring to the table, they have families and jobs, so I'm teaching them through sport but they’re teaching me as well -- life skills. Sometimes I don't know everything about what I'm talking about. We have doctors on our team that tell me, 'ok, maybe this isn't good for us'. So I'm learning from them at the same time as they're learning from me, which is cool.

2. MAs need to know the information justifying coaches’ decisions, and will demand such information if it is not forthcoming.

Athlete: If one of the athletes isn’t able to follow the program, you know, 100%, what ends up usually happening is the results for that person aren’t as good. So that allows the coach to make decisions based on results from tests and then when it comes to [selecting] the ‘A’ boat, that person may sit out some races, but that’s ok because that person is aware of that.

Coach: With teenagers, if you tell them to jump, they're going to say ‘how high?’ And a 40 year old is probably going to say ‘how high’, but they’re also going to say ‘why?’ They want that explanation. We are a highly competitive program, so the 20 best paddlers are going to be in the ‘A’ boat. We do fitness tests that give us empirical data about who the 20 best paddlers are. So we have that [data] and we can get it back to the athletes so they know we're not just subjectively picking who is on the boat. It's a tool for us to show them about the decisions that we're making. They like things to be explained with transparency. I find MAs, way more than younger athletes, are willing to say 'hey, why aren't I in the ‘A’ boat?' So you have to be able to give them real data as to why you're making decisions.

3. Coach sets direction for training but MAs exercise choice for autonomy. Coach directions are guidelines that may be ignored without consequence.

Athlete: It’s nice to come and just do my workout. Having a coach takes the guesswork out of it. I can just focus on what I’m trying to accomplish. It’s like a check to make sure that I’m not over- or under-training. Coaches of MAs need to have a plan AND make sure the plan fits with the athletes’ goals. That’s the key to it. You have to find out what the athletes want to do. When you’re dealing with athletes as adults, it’s got to be more of a joint effort. [My least favourite coach] was a dictator so everything he did along the way, it was as if you had no say in anything.

Coach: We say at the beginning of the year with the high performance programs that if you want to be in the ‘A’ boat, then this is what you're going to have to do and these are our expectations. So then the onus is on them. If they don't show up to practices, if they don't do the fitness tests, if they're not training on their own, they won’t be in the top 20. And if they're ok with that, then that's fine.



Results – Five Themes continued

4. Coach plans flexibility into programming to enable MAs to accommodate demands and duties in their lives

Athlete: My favourite coach is always conscious that everyone is an adult and many have children so everyone’s managing [responsibilities]. He offers suggestions and is supportive so that the athletes don’t feel like they’re short-changing any of their roles in their lives. He doesn't state, “for this day you have to do this.” We have women that are maybe doing their workout on a Friday evening instead of Thursday. He just wants to encourage the team members to complete the workouts that are assigned in any way that they can. And if they miss a workout, then that’s ok, you know? He puts a lot of trust in the athletes to complete the routine but he knows that not everyone does the whole work. Since he puts a lot of time and energy into the workouts, we all said it would be good if we could do at least 80% of the workout.

Coach: Factors we have to deal with when coaching MAs are jobs and families. Those are big factors and they play into it. A lot of times they can't make it to every practice or every regatta because they have a family obligation, so you just have to understand that and be willing to work with them through that. If they can't make the practice, then maybe you suggest something else that they can do at a different time.

5. Coach should communicate timely, technically-sound feedback during training, and respect MAs, warranting a patient/positive coaching approach

Athlete: Coaches have to be educators. I think they should get education courses on communication (laughs). They don’t have to be at the highest level of coach training but their communications skills have to be at a level that’s appropriate for an adult and they have to have patience and they also have to be able to communicate basic skill knowledge and properly demonstrate it to an adult. The coach has to realize that they’re talking to a person that is within the same age range but still has to be able to convey how things can improve. Not everyone is at the same stage [of proficiency], so the coach has to work in a way that the adult doesn’t feel centered-out or insulted. The coach has to be really careful about how they speak to adults because they can feel as if they’re inadequate and then they lose their confidence and not want to carry on in this sport.

Coach: I am learning from my athletes - communication (laugh). Communication's a big one, how to talk to people, communicate what I want them to do so that they can reciprocate. I've learned how to be patient (laugh), that was a tough skill working with older adults. I find adults are very stuck in their ways sometimes. If you say something, it's not necessarily going to click the first time. Little tips or adjustments need to be said again and again. You can get really frustrated if you say something and they just don't do it. So you have to be able to recognize that ‘hey, maybe they are trying, I just need to be patient and give them a little bit more time to get where I want them to be’.

Discussion/ Conclusion

As noted by MacDonald et al. (2009), the successful character that identified many MAs outside of sport was acknowledged as well as the fact that coaches needed to respect these experiences when communicating with athletes. The coach saw this reality as daunting yet also beneficial for her own learning. Results illustrate MAs’ preferences for how a coach communicated, underscoring the need for patience and positivity, discretion and respect when providing feedback to athletes.

The athlete and coach explained how the protocol for selecting competitors was implicitly known, but that data from testing procedures and accountability checks were useful in justifying decisions to MAs. The coach claimed MAs needed to know the rationale for certain drills, emphasizing the respectful approach to facilitating adult learning that is in line with adult learning principles suggested by Knowles et al. (2012)..

The remarkable commitment of MAs was noted in light of other life duties. Stevenson (2002) noted the highly entwined mix of conventions, etiquette, and norms associated with being a “serious” MA. The coach felt that this commitment demanded quality coaching, whereas the athlete felt it earned them a teacher-coach who could communicate timely, technically-sound feedback during training.

To help MAs remain committed while navigating life demands (Young, Callary & Niedre, 2014), it was pointed out that coaches afforded alternative workouts and options within an overarching structured program so that athletes never felt that their training was compromised. Having a structured coach-directed plan that athletes could pursue with autonomy was critical, especially one that considered MAs’ varied motives for challenges and goal pursuit. This is in line with Rathwell et al.’s (2015) findings that MAs wanted varied coaching approaches according to their interests. The athlete appreciated she could exercise her autonomy in choosing to pursue the demands of training, or to choose not to without criticism. The coach saw the import of setting a program with expectations for hard work but accepted it was up to adults to direct themselves in pursuit of such standards.