

# COACHES OF MASTERS ATHLETES: BELIEFS AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR INFLUENCE ON ATHLETES

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## COACHING ADULT SWIMMERS

Adults represent a fast growing sport cohort, but little is known about accommodating and tailoring sport programming to their needs.

In a coached context, Masters Swimmers (MSs; adult athletes typically over 25 years old who regularly train) described diverse benefits to being coached:

- Sport specific: e.g., skill improvement, self-efficacy, heightened sport interest, self-determination,
- Non-sport benefits: e.g., improvements in health and personal development

(Callary et al., 2015; Ferarri et al., 2016; Medic et al., 2012)

MSs 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.

MSs wanted coaches to:

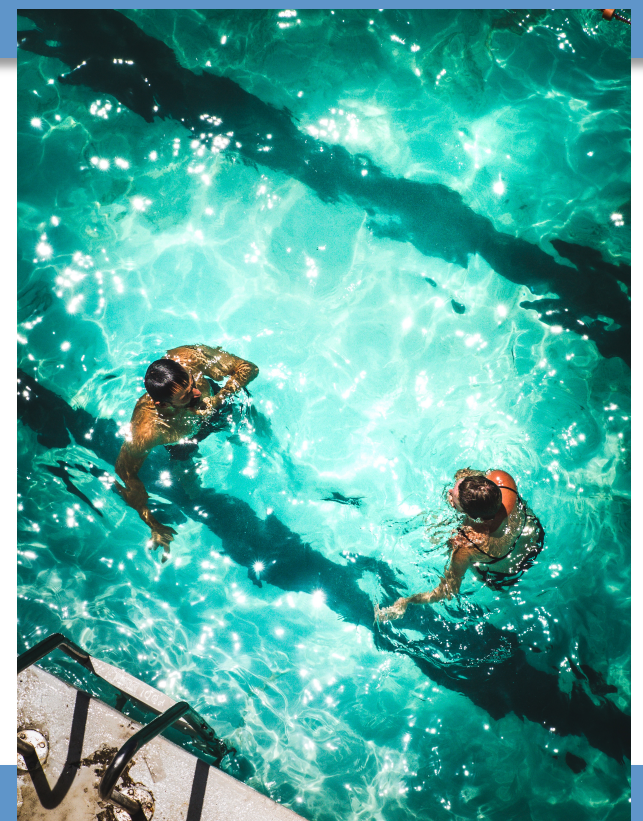
- have experience and knowledge
- hold them accountable
- plan and structure their training
- support them at competition

(Callary et al., 2015; Rathwell et al., 2015)

Coaches of MSs note the bidirectional pattern of communication between themselves and their athletes, MAs' mature self-concept and prior experiences in and out of sport, how they need to personalize goals for MSs, as well as use various motivational strategies to prepare MSs for training due to the heterogeneity of the athletes.

Using adult learning principles (Knowles et al., 2012) allowed coaches to more effectively accommodate their athletes' interests.

(Callary et al., 2017)



## PURPOSE AND METHOD

**Purpose:** To explore how coaches perceive their MAs' motives and accommodate their interests, as well as how coaches perceive their influence on MAs.



This information is important because coach perceptions could influence the ways in which they coach their MAs.

### Participants:

- 11 coaches of MSs (4 female, 7 male) from 6 different clubs in Ontario, Canada
- Ages 36-66 years old
- 3-20 years of coaching experience with MSs for 11 months of the year
- All coaches attended some, but not necessarily all, competitions with their MSs, and the majority still competed, or used to compete at the same meets as their athletes.
- MSs ranged in level from recreational to internationally competitive

Pre-data collection, researchers engaged in bracketing exercise outlining athletic backgrounds, beliefs about coaches, Masters sport, and prior research

### Data collection:

- Semi-structured, in-depth interviews
- Average 74 min (*SD* = 19.34; range = 50–120 min)

### Data analysis:

- Thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- Audio recordings were transcribed; Pseudonyms were assigned to each transcript
- Read, re-read transcripts – understanding of convergence and divergence of data
- Initial codes were developed and notes were written in the margins
- Inductive analysis into themes

## RESULTS

### 1a. Coaches perceived that MSs had specific motives for being coached

**i. Sense of belonging through coaches creating social support:** "It's a huge responsibility (to be a coach) because I've had the same group of swimmers for a long time, and we tend to age together. I'm not just a coach. I'm a confidant, I try to support my swimmers. They tend to trust me. I think they want me to keep them faithful to themselves. When you get busy with family, career, all that stuff, you lose yourself. They want to be reminded of what's important." *Les*

**ii. Technical improvement, structure, and management through researched and planned practices:** "A lot of people are self-motivated but not necessarily self-disciplined. They want a schedule... They want to improve" *Nat*; "They care that I provide quality, researched workouts, goals and objectives" *Carl*

**iii. Safety, health, and fitness:** "Basically, a big percentage of Masters swimmers want to improve health and lifestyle" *Bea*; "They need to feel like it's a safe environment" *Nat*

### 1b. Coaches' reasons for coaching corresponded with the athletes' motives

**i. Social affiliation and feeling one's contribution is valued:** "As a masters coach, I certainly feel more valued as an individual than I do in my fulltime career... There's a sense of pride in who I am and what I can do for someone else that I don't experience anywhere else n my life" *Manny*

**ii. Sharing sport expertise:** "I enjoy sharing my experience and my knowledge with other people. Swimming happens to be one of the areas where I have a reasonable amount of experience and I have a pretty good ability to teach" *Nat*

**iii. Self-improvement related to health and fitness:** "For me, it's a de-stressor when I get there, I get to influence people positively" *Bea*; "It's actually been good for my swimming because I think about those things I've told my swimmers and I have a better visual of the effect on my stroke" *Carl*

### 2. Coaches believed that MSs' heterogeneous backgrounds influenced the way they coached and that they possessed personal characteristics that their athletes liked

"We've got swimmers from 25-87 years old, and although we have a minimum requirement of a 1000 meter swim, you've got people who can't do anything but freestyle, and you've got world class swimmers... It makes it really challenging for a coach... It has to do with your personality on deck and the style with which you either correct or suggest feedback. There's a certain lightness, sense of humour. Everybody has a different style and between us four coaches, we have four totally different styles, and it seems to work. We don't want a homogenous set of coaches, for sure, and we certainly don't have it here." *Alex*

"I'm approachable, I'm not shy. I joke around. It's good to be a coach that can relate to swimmers and that can actually learn from them, listen to your swimmers, what they like, what they don't like." *Bea*

### 3. Coaches believed they influenced athletes' sport performance, skill improvement, and motivation, but they generally noted they did not influence the development of the adult beyond sport

"I think the biggest influence is that I insist that they work as a group, as a team within their lane... That starts with the coach. You have to build that kind of thinking pattern in them that this is a family." *Denny*

"[I think I influence] their progress from the slow to the next fastest lane, time shaved off in competition, and even motivation that they show up year after year after year." *Erin*

"I would say I have a big influence on them. The fact that I compete, I have a pretty big influence because of that. A lot of swimmers come to me because they know who I am, and they've seen my results and they want to get coached by me in the pool. But their personal development? No, not really. They're adults. They don't want to be bothered with that." *Bea*

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The coaches' perceptions of their MSs' motives for being coached align with MSs' stated motives: social, health and fitness, and striving and challenge (Rathwell et al., 2015; Vallerand & Young, 2014) as well as with the coaches' own motives for coaching.

MSs want coaches who are experienced and professional; know how, when and to whom to give feedback; and provide instruction and structured training (Callary et al., 2015). The coaches demonstrated awareness of the heterogeneity of MAs and noted how they can accommodate this – by coaching in groups, by being approachable, relatable, and by listening to their athletes needs.



Positive Youth Development is a popular lens for appraising coaching tasks with youth and increasingly a topic in high performance coaching (Rathwell et al., 2014). MSs generally do not need or want, or feel that coaches work on, coaching in life skills (Callary et al. 2015). Coaches in this study corroborate, refuting they have a responsibility to explicitly work on MSs' socio-emotional and personal development. Fraser-Thomas et al. (2013) suggested Masters athletes' developmental outcomes in sport include: confidence and competence, character, connection, commitment, cognitive development and challenge. Currie and Callary (2017) explored these outcomes in relation to a coach's approaches and found that while a coach worked on numerous athletic outcomes, character and personal/social assets were not developed. This is a future research area in Masters coaching.

The Masters coaches' dismissal of a role in athletes' broader development, and their description of efforts to enrich the training environment without a fulsome consideration of competitive preparation, may relate to ageist conceptions about adult sport that restrict such understandings to youth sport.

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### Implications:

Based on this research, coach education for Masters coaches, and in particular, mentoring from seasoned Masters coaches may help coaches learn about the importance of having variance in their approaches to accommodate adults' heterogeneity of motives and understand how to effectively work within an adult athlete context.

Funding provided by:



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada  
Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada



Cape  
Breton  
University