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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Athletes' Perceptions of Developing Relationships Through Adult-Oriented Coaching in Online Contexts

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Online coaching has grown in popularity, in which the coach and athlete work together using Internet-based platforms, without meeting in person. Kettlebell lifting has been using the online format for some time. The majority of Kettlebell lifters are Masters Athletes (MAs), over the age of 35 years, and competing in registered events around the world. Adult-oriented psychosocial coaching approaches that prioritize relationship development have proven to be successful when coaching MAs. While the coach–athlete relationship has been extensively examined, it is not known how the coach–athlete relationship is created and maintained in an online-only environment. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of MAs' relationships with their online coaches. Five kettlebell lifters were interviewed to explore their experiences of having online coaches. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the lifters' individual experiences within the online coaching environment were examined. Three higher order themes suggest (a) initial relationship building involves the coach selection by the MA, as well as developing closeness and complementary behaviors; (b) progressing in the relationship through communication; and (c) coach programming that is adaptable and negotiated. The coach–athlete relationship for mature adults in an online-only platform can be fostered through adult-oriented approaches.

Keywords: kettlebell, Masters Athlete, coach, psychosocial, remote

Over the last several years, advancements in technology and online platforms have allowed the opportunity for athletes and coaches to connect not only in person, but also at a distance. Szedlak et al. (2022) discussed that there has been continued growth in technology and a variety of social media platforms that can be used toward an athlete's sport development. Further, coaches and athletes can be available for live interactions through digital platforms such as Skype and Zoom. Cushion and Townsend (2019) suggest that technology enhances learning when it is integrated into overall coaching by providing structure for feedback, observation, and improved self-awareness when using a coach analysis intervention system. Many apps have been developed that allow a coach the opportunity to make corrections, showing the athlete a step-by-step process of their movements. However, it is not clear whether or how the affective and cognitive aspects of relationships are impacted by, or developed in, an online environment. This study explores adult athletes' perceptions of their relationships with their online coaches in Kettlebell sport. We begin by providing an overview of the pertinent research in online coaching, followed by an explanation of the key features of a coach–athlete relationship (CAR). We then explain Masters (adult) Kettlebell sport and the research into psychosocial adult-oriented coaching practices.

Online Coaching

The literature that explores online coaching in terms of its impact on the relationships between a coach and athlete examines this phenomenon with dyads that already have preexisting relationships and have moved online for various reasons. Szedlak et al. (2022) explored managing this relationship when the Great Britain national sailing team was forced to move online during the pandemic and coaches worked online to enable the athletes an opportunity to continue training. Bennett (2020) also discussed transitioning to online coaching a Kendo fencing team. Both Bennett and Szedlak and colleagues found that trust in each other's abilities had been established in person prior to moving to online coaching, and the coach already understood the athletes' capabilities. Further, Szedlak and colleagues found that the participants preferred an in-person coaching experience but were able to gain some positives from online coaching, such as getting to know one another's personal space and see personal (family) interactions that they might not have seen in-person at the training venue. Further, the online environment allowed athletes more autonomy to make choices about their training, such as when and how it is done, while still receiving their coaches' support online. This helped athletes feel at once empowered and closer to their coaches, while also allowing the dyads to work together in comfortable environments. It is unknown how closeness, commitment, and the ability to work together are built when no prior in-person relationship has formed between the coach and athlete before the online interactions.

The Coach–Athlete Relationship

Establishing a solid foundation in the CAR helps to navigate obstacles during practice or competition, enables guidance for goals, creates insight for opportunities, and assistance, in times of need (Yang & Jowett, 2012). Jowett (2017) explains that the quality of the relationship between a coach and athlete is one of the most important elements when it comes to successful coaching, with the interdependence allowing for growth in both the athlete and coach. When the coach takes an athlete-centered approach, a relationship is built on trust and respect between a coach and athlete and enables athletes' feelings of empowerment, self-awareness,

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independence, and self-efficacy in learning skills, and better intrinsic motivation to continue with their sport and competitions (Zehntner & Penney, 2017). Opposingly, if the dyad is not able to establish a positive and supportive relationship, this can create feelings of negativity, reduced self-confidence, and rejection in the athlete and have a sweeping negative impact on their performance and sport experience (Davis et al., 2018).

The CAR is defined by Jowett (2017) as a social interaction that is continuous as it is shaped by the coach and athlete's behaviors and feelings that are interchangeably and influentially interdependent. In other words, how one feels and behaves toward the other is directly related to how the other feels and acts toward them. Jowett's (2017) 3 + 1C's include: (a) closeness, which is the bond that exists between the coach and athlete as it relates to their trust, respect, appreciation, and a true liking of one another; (b) commitment, which addresses how they maintain a relationship to one another despite any adversities they may face; (c) complementarity, which examines the cooperative behaviors between the coach and athlete that show eagerness, receptiveness, and friendliness between the two; and (d) co-orientation, which is reflective of the coach and athletes' understanding of the overall quality of their relationship. The 3 + 1C model affords us the opportunity to further investigate the CAR and to decipher whether an online relationship includes closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation.

Masters Kettlebell Sport

While Jowett's work has mostly addressed CAR in high-performance settings, Callary et al. (2020) suggest that this model may be well suited to understanding the complex relationship of coaches with adult athletes who are past the age of peak performance and engaged in sport for leisure reasons, often referred to as Masters Athletes (MAs). Kettlebell sport is made up predominantly of adults typically over the age of 35 years, who compete individually. There are many Masters Divisions that go up in 10 year increments (International Kettlebell Marathon Federation, 2023). The sport has been gaining popularity over the decades, with the first committee established in Russia in 1985 (Fleur, 2022). Traditional kettlebell lifting consists of 10-min sets in one of three or more events of snatch, long cycle, and biathlon (jerk + snatch) where the athlete attempts to get as many reps that are judged as possible in the 10-min time frame. There are also marathons (30 or 60 min). The kettlebells range in weights of 8–32 kg for women and 16–40 kg for men (International Kettlebell Marathon Federation, 2023).

The CAR is important to explore within Kettlebell Masters sport in particular, as this is a growing cohort of athletes, with a simultaneous growing need for coaches (Fleur, 2022). Research has shown that Masters coaches' approaches can influence the enjoyment and commitment that MAs put into their sport participation (Callary et al., 2017; Currie et al., 2022), affecting retention of lifelong sport participants. Callary et al. (2015b) found that MAs wanted specific psychosocial support from their coaches, and when coaches put in the effort to ensure that they were effectively programming to the individual, engaging in bi-directional communication, and taking into account the mature, self-directed nature of MAs, then they created a conducive environment for MAs' learning. Further, to best accommodate MAs' sport interests, they wanted coaches who empathized with the challenges and obligations that they have (e.g., kids, work) and tailored their support to their MAs' learning and improvement accordingly (MacLellan et al., 2019).

Psychosocial Adult-Oriented Coaching Practices

Rathwell et al. (2020) found five specific psychosocial adult-oriented coaching practices that can be used to motivate and retain adult sport participants by meeting their various needs and interests. These are outlined in the adult-oriented sport coaching survey (AOSCS) as: (a) considering the individuality of the athlete; (b) framing learning situations; (c) imparting coaching knowledge; (d) respecting preferences for effort, accountability, and feedback; and (e) creating personalized programming. The AOSCS themes and items are outlined in Table 1. The overall aim of the AOSCS is to allow an opportunity for coaches to reflect upon their coaching and encourage more self-awareness so that athletes are receiving quality sport experiences (Young et al., 2021).

The AOSCS themes have been associated with the 3 + 1Cs of the CAR (Motz et al., 2022). Specifically, if coaches focus on adult-oriented coaching practices by, for example, providing personalized training, respecting the effort the athlete puts in, and holding MAs accountable, then MAs feel committed, close, and behavioral complementarity with their coach. The AOSCS factors together may address co-orientation in the CAR. However, it is not clear how coaches using online platforms might demonstrate adult-oriented coaching practices outlined in the AOSCS, as there are no studies that have examined adult-oriented coaching practices related to the CAR in online environments.

Given the importance of the CAR, it is pertinent to understand this phenomenon in an online relationship. Online coaching may be well suited to Masters sport because the autonomy of online environments may fit well with MAs' matured self-concepts. Further, given the importance of adult-oriented coaching practices in Masters sport and the association of these practices to the CAR, it is important to explore online coaching approaches for MAs as they relate to adult-oriented practices. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore MAs' perceptions of their relationships with their online coaches. This study is valuable because online coaching is growing in popularity, especially since the COVID pandemic provided the impetus for online platforms, which provided certain benefits beyond in-person coaching (Szedlak et al., 2022). Further, as Masters sport gains momentum, it is important for coaches to understand how to support adults' online coaching needs.

Methodology

As this study explored the multiple realities of different participants, we assume a social constructivist epistemology and a relativist ontology (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Each participant's lived experience was deemed valuable and understood in the way in which they interpreted the experiences they had through the interviews that we conducted and the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Larkin et al., 2019). Because of the interpretative element, it is important to outline our positionality as the authors of this paper.

The first author has been involved in kettlebell sport since 2013. She started as a MA and became a coach in 2015. Her insider status as a coach and athlete in the online context of kettlebell sport allowed for deeper conversations because of the shared lexicon and understanding. However, she also needed to be aware that she may take for granted the participants' answers. The use of a critical friend, the second author, who was also the first author's supervisor on this study, was vital for encouraging reflexivity, construction of knowledge, and added depth to the research (Smith & McGannon,

Table 1 Adult-Oriented Sport Coaching Survey Themes and Items

Considering the individuality of athletes
• Individualize your coaching for each adult athlete based on what they have been able to do in past experiences
• Listen to your adult athletes' comments about their past experiences to inform how you set up their training
• Ask your adult athletes about their past experiences to help you plan their training
• Consider what your adult athletes want to accomplish when organizing their training
Framing learning situations
• Create situations wherein your adult athletes discover for themselves why they are learning a skill/tactic
• Use performance assessments to help your adult athletes understand why they need to learn a skill/tactic
• Ready your adult athletes to learn by exposing them to higher skilled peers, competitors, or role models
• Ask your adult athletes to do drills in which they need to resolve a challenge
• Ask your adult athletes to relate drills/exercises to problems they are facing in sport
• Ask your adult athletes to relate their training to concerns they are facing outside of sport
• Set up opportunities for competitive activities for your adult athletes during practice
Imparting coaching knowledge
• Identify to your adult athletes how your own sport experience bears on the information that you share with them
• Share information from your own professional coaching development with your adult athletes
• Bring in information to your adult athletes that you have picked up in your sport experiences elsewhere (i.e., outside of your current program or club)
Respecting preferences for effort, accountability, and feedback
• Consider how each of your adult athletes wishes to be pushed during practice
• Consider your adult athletes' preferences for being held responsible for working hard
• Take measures to better understand what each adult athlete wants in terms of coaching feedback
Creating personalized programming
• Pay attention to where your adult athletes are in terms of their progress relative to season-long plans
• Consider how to accommodate your adult athletes when you set up practice/competitive schedules
• Point out to your adult athletes aspects of long-term programming (e.g., practice/competitive schedules) that you have tailored to them
• Consider how to accommodate your adult athletes in terms of programming, such as practice or competitive schedules
• Tailor your support to individual adult athletes at competitions

Note: Modified from "Insights into the importance of relational coaching for Masters Sport," by Callary, B., Young, B. W., & Rathwell, S. (2021). *Coaching masters athletes: Advancing research and practice in adult sport*. Routledge.

2017). The second author has no involvement in kettlebell sport, but is a MA and coach in various other sports, as well as a researcher in sport coaching and Masters sport.

Participants

This study received ethical approval from the authors' institution. All participants gave consent prior to their participation. The participants consisted of three women and two men ranging in age from 37 to 54 years of age. All participants resided in Canada. At the time of data collection, the participants were training and competing in kettlebell sport. They had been working with their current coach for 1–8 years. An additional criterion that was considered essential for inclusion in this study was that the participants must only be coached by their kettlebell coach through an online platform. Further, they could not have had an in-person relationship with their coach before or since meeting them online. All participants were given pseudonyms for this study. Erin is a 50-year-old female lifter who has been lifting competitively for 10 years and working with her coach for 7 years. Lucy is a 49-year-old female lifter, has been competitively lifting for 9 years, and has been with her coach for 8 years. Jenn is a 37-year-old female lifter, has been competing in kettlebell sport for 8 years, and has been with her coach for just over 1 year. Mike is a male 54-year-old lifter, has been lifting competitively for 8 years, and with his coach for 5 years. Finally, Jason is a 37-year-old male, lifting competitively for 8 years and with his coach for 2 years. All participants interacted with their coaches through apps such as Facebook messenger, Zoom, Instagram, Instagram messenger, text messaging, and Excel spreadsheets.

Data Collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in an online format through Zoom since the participants were spread throughout Canada. Interviews were recorded with prior consent from each participant. Semi-structured interviews allowed for interviews to be flexible and relaxed with open-ended questions in which participants could speak openly and freely about their experiences, giving the researcher the opportunity to ask them to expand or clarify their responses (Jones et al., 2014).

The interviews ranged from 65 to 84 min in length. The first section of questions provided background information of the MA within kettlebell sport asking questions such as: How long have they been in the sport? How many coaches have they had? They were also asked about initial contact with their coach. The interview then moved into the CAR, asking questions that related to *closeness* (e.g., How often are you in contact with your coach? How does your coach help you through adversities?), *commitment* (e.g., On days that you are struggling to complete training, what gets you through? How does your coach motivate you to push through?), and *complementarity* (e.g., Do you feel at ease with your

coach? Are you comfortable enough with your coach to question programming and the direction it is taking?). By asking these questions, the researcher could explore MAs' perceptions they have of their relationship with their online coach with the guidance of Jowett's 3 + 1C model. Further, with regard to co-orientation, a final section involved five questions that addressed the themes of the AOSCS (Rathwell et al., 2020) to see whether the athletes felt that the coach used adult-oriented coaching practices that aligned with their needs and wants (e.g., How does your coach enrich your learning environment? Can you provide examples? Does your coach consider your experiences and motives? If so, how? Do they tailor their approaches to you? How?).

Data Analysis

Using IPA, the researchers had an opportunity to learn through the MAs' personal experiences of having an online coach where there was no prior relationship. There are typically small numbers of participants in studies that utilize IPA because it applies an idiographic approach, firstly analyzing the data from one participant line-by-line to code for categories within the transcript (Callary et al., 2015a). After doing this for each transcript separately, only then are the codes analyzed across transcripts, to create a thematic progression where the researcher analyzes the data all together (Larkin et al., 2019). In this way, the researcher can focus on the unique experience of each participant in turn to better understand how the individual makes sense of and has processed those experiences before turning to the next (Larkin et al., 2019). Smith (2004) described IPA as including a double hermeneutic since the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant making sense of their lived experiences within the context being investigated.

Thus, the first author read the first participant's transcript several times and coded meaningful units that outlined the participant's online coached experiences. This included making interpretative notes that connected to the CAR or AOSCS themes (such as "sharing athletic and coaching experiences inspire the athlete") and to the online context (such as "credibility/relatability of the coach is meaningful when seeking online coaches—when you join a gym, you are restricted to the coach who works there. But online, she searches coaches all around the world—the athlete can be much choosier"). Then, the first author moved onto the next participant's transcript, and so forth, until all transcripts had been separately coded.

Once all transcripts were coded, both researchers examined the codes and notes to see how they intersected across transcripts. Similar codes were grouped until nine themes were formed, including: the selection process/social media; communication is key; closeness—Is it important? trust rooted in coach's success and experience; programming credibility and relatability; technique corrections and videoing that creates autonomy; coach adapts when needed; MAs know their goals and bring them to the coach; and challenges of online coaching. After the research team carefully considered and discussed each theme, they determined that looking across the thematic structures from each of the interviews, one theme (challenges of online coaching) was prevalent only in two transcripts and did not represent the whole. Instead, the codes from that theme were merged into other themes (communication and selection). Other themes were better divided under higher order themes (for instance, the theme regarding the coach's success and experience was divided into selection and programming). Three higher order themes remained but were renamed as the researchers examined the selected quotes. Originally named selection, communication, and programming, the themes were renamed to initial relationship building, progressing in the relationship, and programming.

Within each of the three themes, there were two or three subthemes to nuance how these themes were perceived and interpreted with regard to the CAR (e.g., closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation). We also noted that these are connected to adult-oriented coaching practices. Therefore, within the results, we use language that connects these themes to pertinent adult-oriented coaching practices as outlined in the AOSCS (e.g., the coach considered the individuality of the athlete; the coach respected the athlete's preferences for effort and feedback). See Table 2 for details.

Results

The results outline the three themes. (a) The initial relationship building: the subthemes highlight the participants' processes of selecting a coach, developing closeness, and understanding the importance of complementarity with their coach; (b) progressing in the relationship (commitment): the subthemes describe communication for closeness and complementarity through communication; (c) Programming: the subthemes explain that there was complementarity in the ways the coach was able to adapt the program for the MA and that there was co-orientation in the relationship and commitment to the program.

Initial Relationship Building

In finding and building a relationship with the coach, the participants all spoke of (a) their selection of a coach who they felt

Table 2 Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme related to CAR	Connection to AOSCS theme
Initial relationship building	Selection of coach	Imparting coaching knowledge
	Developing closeness	Considering individuality of athletes; Respecting preferences
	Understanding the importance of complementarity	Considering individuality of athletes
Progressing in the relationship (commitment)	Communication for closeness	Considering individuality of athletes; Respecting preferences; framing learning situations
	Complementarity through communication	
Programming	Complementarity in adapting the program	Creating personalized programming
	Co-orientation, commitment to program	Considering individuality of athletes; Imparting coaching knowledge

Note. AOSCS = adult-oriented sport coaching survey; CAR = coach–athlete relationship.

imparted knowledge that they wanted to learn, (b) developing closeness through the coach considering their individuality and respecting their preferences for effort and feedback, and (c) finding a coach whose behaviors matched and were reciprocal to their individuality.

Selection of Coach

When it came to the selection of a coach, all the participants noted that they found their coaches on social media, and that they did not live close to the coach (sometimes not even in the same country). In the online environment, the athlete had the opportunity to search a variety of resources all over the world to find a coach. These MAs turned to social media platforms to learn as much as they could about their potential coaches. Most participants noted that because they had never previously met their coach, they looked them up on YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook via profiles, videos, interviews, and podcasts that the lifters (coaches) had participated in. This allowed the participants to see what the coaches had accomplished in their lifting career and to get a sense of the applied knowledge that the potential coach had before reaching out and making the first initial contact. Erin explained,

> I actually found her on Youtube first ... so then I took that name after having watched a bunch of videos of competitions and then did a Facebook search and found her. Then I sent out emails just like "hey, I saw you on Youtube, you're pretty awesome. Do you coach?"

Erin chose her coach because she perceived her to be the best lifter in the world in all three of the main lifts at 24 kg. "It was kind of a leveling up [sic]. She is, in my mind, the best lifter in the world ... it just made sense to go with the best." In other words, Erin felt like with this coach, she could move up a level.

For Jenn, she found a powerlifting coach on social media, and started asking questions about how she could relate it to kettlebell sport training,

> So, I started following him and he would post questions on his story on Instagram, like "hit me up if you have training questions." I would always ask stuff and he's like, "what do you mean?" because he didn't know kettlebell sport [sic], so I explained it and he's like, "Ok, well I don't really know your sport, so we can work through this, and I can program for you to add reps if that's what you need. So, we tried it."

The participants immediately trusted and respected the coaches' knowledge and values because of their research into the coach's own athletic experiences. Jenn noted that she looked up to her coach "because he's very popular in the powerlifting community" and she felt that it was important to have a coach that she could respect and appreciate. She explained, "Oh, wow, like they're super fit, or they're super good at what they're doing. That's awesome. They show dedication and so those are qualities I admire." Likewise Jason was appreciative of being able to connect over Instagram with a lifter that shared his interest for the sport and wanted someone who showed knowledge of the next level that he wanted to achieve: "it's been awesome to talk with [my coach] ... . I really appreciate the ability to understand what my coach [who is also a professional lifter] goes through to get to where they want to be." Lucy also discussed that her coach posted videos of his sets and his various accomplishments. She shared, "I always have great confidence in what he's requesting [of me] because of what he has achieved on his own."

Thus, for all the participants, the coach selection process was one of finding a lifter and then seeing if they would coach. The coach was found and selected because they shared their athletic experiences, which allowed the participants to feel as though, even before the relationship started, the coach was imparting knowledge and that they could support the MAs.

Developing Closeness

With the initial trust and respect that the coach's social media profiles engendered, and having established that they would coach, the participants entered the relationship with an understanding of the coach. They all were interested in developing closeness with their coach. For Lucy, it was important to have someone that understood her as a person and as an athlete. Describing her initial contact with her coach, she said, "it was really good to chat over messenger ... he got to know a little more about me ... it's important for him to know I'm headstrong, a stubborn individual for when he's coaching me." She expanded that her coach "had a list of questions about what kind of training had I done, and I had to send videos." Lucy added that her coach also "took the time to understand what my capabilities were in the beginning and really honed in on my mental capacity, because that's huge in kettlebell sport." Hence, Lucy perceived that the coach's interest in listening to her past experiences to plan and set up training, and individualizing the approach by considering her personality helped to develop closeness. Erin also explained that for her "in the beginning we would talk all the time and we would message almost daily on messenger [Facebook]." From divulging so many details about themselves, the participants felt that they were creating closeness.

Further, participants discussed the need for their coaches to respect their preferences for effort from the outset. Jenn acknowledged the necessity in having a coach that "gets her" and for her that meant having a coach who "knows when to push me and knows when to ease into it and be softer with me ... that helps me trust him and appreciate what he's doing as a coach." She explained, "I filled out an intake form ... and then we did a zoom conference, he asked a bunch of questions, like injuries, what I liked, didn't like, my personality, how I go about lifting, all these things." For Mike, it was important to "have someone to help guide me in how I was learning and how I was progressing." This speaks to the importance of the coach understanding what the MA wants in terms of feedback in order to develop closeness.

Understanding the Importance of Complementarity

The participants described how important it was to have a coach that could match their personality and use corresponding behaviors to meet their needs by collaboratively guiding them to the outcome they wanted to achieve. It was very important for Lucy to find someone that she felt shared mutual interests: "there were three coaches I looked at ... after watching some videos and a couple of interviews and, I'm not gonna lie, doing a price comparison too, right? [Then I chose one]." Thus, having a similar attitude about kettlebell sport, as seen in the ways that the coach's costs matched the athletes' expectations, helped to confirm that there would be complementarity in the relationship. In building the initial relationship, Mike also noted that he wanted a coach who "wasn't going to treat me as someone starting from scratch, but could also recognize that, okay some of [those training methods] might not be useful ... and I saw that with my coach." Thus, these participants spoke to the importance of considering their individuality when

organizing their training and matching that through reciprocal behaviors.

Progressing in the Relationship

The participants were committed to working with their coaches, having stayed with them for so long. Erin noted that "it's 6 or 7 years later and I'm still here. And yeah, I feel like my needs are being met." This commitment was strengthened in developing closeness between the athlete and coach, and complementarity in behaviors, which allowed for the progression in the relationship. Indeed, as the relationships progressed, two subthemes were discussed. Firstly, closeness was construed only so far as a working relationship wherein the coach or athlete needed to communicate information for training. Thus, communication supported their closeness, and secondly, it also allowed them to understand how to behave in complementary ways, strengthening their online relationship.

Communication for Closeness

Closeness was understood as a sharing of information and communication about training that did not necessarily include friendship, intimacy, or attachment. Four out of the five participants responded that being close to their coach was not important as they were paying for a service. Jenn said, "I don't think [closeness is] important . . . . I'm paying him to coach me, not to be my friend." However, closeness was in fact manifested through her communication with the coach. Jenn also noted, "I talk to him about everything that relates to training. I don't have a problem talking to him about injuries or [menstruation] . . . so I would say we are as close as you can be." Jason explained that his relationship with his coach was built on mutual respect. "I'd say we're friendly, but I wouldn't go so far as to say we are close." He explained that this meant that they would comment back-and-forth on each other's Instagram posts. Lastly, Mike felt that while "the purpose of having a coach is to achieve results," he also acknowledged that he has been with his coach for several years. He explained that his relationship with his coach was "based within that professional CAR" but expanded that

> over the course of our relationship, we've become friends . . . . Is it a friendship? I think so. But it's a friendship with a one-dimensional foundation, that has the capacity to expand . . . as friendly as we can be, I am also work [*sic*]. [for the coach]

Thus, the communication between the coach and athlete provided information to consider the athlete's individual needs and enabled a professional working relationship to unfold.

Complementarity Through Communication

Through the online environment, coach and athlete were communicating through the use of messenger [Facebook], as well as Instagram messaging, and text messages. There was a bi-directional conversation that took place for both to know what the other meant and wanted. At the beginning, this process was much more frequent and then as time passed and the coach and athlete knew one another better, this communication became less frequent. Lucy shared that

> when I first started, there was a lot of communication because he was just getting to know me . . . if I didn't understand something I would ask . . . sometimes there was a bit more of an explanation needed.

Thus, as the relationship developed, the complementarity in their behaviors that was determined early on as mutually reciprocal allowed the coach and athlete to exchange information more easily and faster. Once the coaches knew how to individualize their approaches for the participants, there was not such a frequent need to consider, or ask their athletes what they wanted, because they already knew the answer.

However, when Jenn posted on Instagram that she was having a bad day or struggling mentally, she said that her coach reached out to her, "he does pick up if I'm having a bad day or my mind isn't in it, he'll be like, 'get your mind right,' he does pick up on those things. He is an attentive coach." Thus, in the established relationship, the coach could instead respect the athletes' preferences, when to push, and when to support, based on their shared understandings.

The ability for the coach and athlete to communicate in an online environment was important to allow the coach to know what was going on with the athlete and this takes time and effort from both parties. Erin summarized: "Just like you need to communicate in person, you need to communicate online . . . whether it works is like whether I put effort into communicating . . . . It's just learning to do it in a different way [online]." Lucy echoed this thought: "the communication of feedback is a critical part of any online program."

All participants shared the ways in which coaching was communicated through framed learning situations using apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and Huddle, or getting feedback from videos. Jenn shared that "he would have me film [the lift], then send it, and then he would suggest how to tweak it a little bit and he would give me cues and then we move forward." Mike also shared that the coach demonstration through video was a way to learn more information about cleaning up technique. Erin shared that "I would film [the lift] and then she would attach next to it a video of her doing the same movement and actually draw on it to say "see you're doing this, and I'd like you do to this." She also noted that her coach's modeling "has been huge, getting the feedback and having her break down the video clips." Importantly, Erin said that framing learning situations through exposing her to higher skilled demonstrations or allowing her to discover through video why she was working on skills was something that her coach did earlier in their relationship, she continued: "but that was early days . . . 3–4 years later, I haven't needed that." On the other hand, Lucy found that, in watching her video of herself, it became a way for her to critique her own lifting, which was a valuable learning tool. She explained, "if I'm doing anything technical with regard to movement, watching my video really brings to light what I am doing and what I'm not." Thus, the coaches' use of video, apps, spreadsheets, and bi-directional conversations were key coaching tools that were complementary learning situations that also strengthened their online relationship.

Programming

The participants spoke at length about their coach's programming. They indicated that the coach's ability to make adaptations in the programming was complementary to their needs in creating personalized programming. They also perceived that the co-orientation in collaborating on achieving the athletes' goals, both by following the athletes' lead and by relating to their experiences, built trust in the participants to follow the programming.

Complementarity in Adapting the Program

The participants spoke of the ways in which the coaches were able to adapt the program based on what they needed when it came to

planning and carrying out their goals. Therefore, because they had developed closeness and had open lines of communication, the coach knew how to individualize the program, whether that was across the season/year or within an individual week or session, to the participant's needs. All five participants discussed the ways in which their coache accommodated practices and schedules based on their lifestyles, injuries, and setbacks to still ensure they were able to successfully achieve their overall goals. Jason explained, "he was definitely tailoring [the program] to my goals for the competitions that I had coming up, and he would change if I had any problems." Similarly, Jenn shared that "my work changes so drastically … he's very good at figuring out how to get everything in with my work." Erin shared that her coach has "been super flexible with where I'm at, what I can do and what my goals are." She explained that she suffered setbacks from injuries and illnesses, but her coach simply adapted the program and changed the target, "she's totally supported me through that and helps me along. Whatever goal I set for a particular competition I've always met it." Thus, the coach's abilities to create personalized programming and pay attention to their athletes' progress was appreciated and strengthened their relationship.

Co-orientation and Commitment to Program

When it came to goal setting and planning the process of achieving their goals through programming, all the participants explained how this was a collaborative process that they led as the athletes. That is, they would tell their coach what their goals were and engage in a discussion with the coach about planning, asking their coaches for input. The participants thus described the co-orientation of their relationship. Lucy provided an example: "so usually it's me [setting goals]. But I bring [the goal] to him and say, 'what do you think?' OK. I don't go to him and say, 'this is what I will do.'" Thus, the goals were a negotiation, led by the athlete, and agreed upon by the coach, whereby the athlete relied on the coach's expertise and knowledge of their individual abilities to check that their goals were appropriate and to program for how they could be achieved. As Mike explained: "setting the goal, [I say] to my coach 'hey, I feel like doing this.' And then she helps to develop the parameters to say 'ok, let"s see what you can do.'"

Like when selecting the coach, imparting coaching knowledge continued to be important in creating commitment in the relationship. When the coach identified how their sport experiences were relatable to their athletes' experiences, the participants felt they wanted to commit to completing the coach's programs. They explained how they needed to feel like the coach understood firsthand what they were going through. Jason shared that "we watched his sets a couple of times … he would share what he was thinking at these times. It was relatable … almost a mutual understanding of where each other is coming from." Erin also said, "she has resources [that she shares] in dealing with the challenges that come up in this sport … she knows how to work around them." Such trust in the process enabled further commitment by the participants to the coach's programming.

Discussion

This study explored MAs' perceptions of their relationship with their online coach. The results outline three themes related to how coach–athlete relationships are formed, progress, and how programming supports the CAR as perceived in online environments from these Masters kettlebell athletes. The results are now discussed in light of both Jowett's (2017) 3 + 1Cs model and five adult-oriented sport coaching approaches (Rathwell et al., 2020).

This study is the first to consider how adult athletes select their coaches in an online format where no prior relationship existed, which is uniquely different from in person selections where the coach and athlete are typically matched as they work for, and register with, a club or team in a given location. In this study, the credibility of the coach was key to their selection, to the athletes' perceptions of feeling close to the coach, and to the commitment of the athletes to their coaches. Through social media, MAs found successful athletes and used online videos and podcast interviews to assess whether they felt the lifter could help them to achieve their own goals. The use of social media has increased substantially over the years and has created a variety of ways in which there can be communication between the coach and athlete as shown by Bennett (2020) when they used Google Hangouts. Other platforms can also be used such as Zoom, Facebook messenger, and Skype. Hay (2011) found that a Facebook page for sport science research could be a useful link for practitioners to access scientific information. However, the credibility of information found on social media and ways in which it can impact decision making need to be critically examined. For example, Koh and Leng (2018) set up a fictitious sport coaching service marketed on Facebook and found that social influences (e.g., the number of "likes") affected consumers' perceptions and intentions to purchase these coaching services. Thus, while this study indicated that social media are able to serve as a tool to kickstart a CAR, whereby the athlete can begin to feel close to the coach even before making initial contact, this finding should be exercised on a practical level with some caution.

This study is the first to extend the use of Jowett's 3 + 1C model to online settings. In particular, the quality of the relationship may be different when the coach and athlete meet and interact solely online. The participants indicated that closeness was a function of a professional relationship, whereby they gave intimate details (such as menstruation cycles), but only for the purposes of understanding training. They were friendly, but ultimately understood that the relationship was one-dimensional, where the coach worked for and was paid by the athlete. This did not appear to have negative implications. Is this the result of developing the relationship online, or the result of an adult's mature and logical attitude of understanding the implications of a pay-for-service? We cannot be sure. On the one hand, research into coached masters sport indicates that some adults have a "pay-for-play," detached attitude toward their coach, in which they will simply stop payment for a coach that they do not deem to be fitting (Rathwell et al., 2015). On the flip side, in Currie et al.' (2022) study, the coach was "best friends" with some of her MAs, and their relationship extended beyond the sport arena. Thus, the closeness of the relationships built in masters sport between the coach and athlete appears varied and individual based on the dyad in which it can, but may not need to be cherished. Turning to the online format, Szedlak et al.' (2022) study indicated that the athletes enjoyed seeing into the private lives of their coaches through online platforms in which they could see the coach's home and interactions with family. The athletes in Szedlak et al.'s study felt closer to the coach as a result of the online platform, which was heralded as a positive feature to develop online. However, those high-performance athletes also had pre-existing professional relationships with the coaches. It appears that the athletes in our study did not see, hear, or talk about their coaches' lives outside of the sport environment, and thus did not have the chance to develop their relationships further; however,

they also did not appear to want that. Therefore, unlike other studies exploring closeness between coach and athlete, our results indicate that a strictly online coached environment within Masters sport does not need the coach and athletes to bond beyond a friendly working relationship.

Regarding commitment, the athletes in this study talked about wanting to remain with their coaches. This was most often identified because of the complementary behaviors between the coach and athlete, in which the coach's actions matched what the athletes wanted, and there was mutual and reciprocal effort. The importance of establishing complementary behaviors began immediately in the formation of their relationship, and once known, could be easily followed to deepen the relationship as it progressed. Jowett et al. (2012) also noted the importance of bi-directional communication between the coach and athlete to create complementarity through reciprocal, cooperative, friendly, and relaxed conversation. Jowett et al. suggest that this communication happens in a variety of ways. In the online CAR, the communication happened through various apps, but the nonverbal body language and immediacy of the feedback may be ignored or delayed. For this reason, our results indicate that, in an online setting, it is crucial that the expectations and understanding of complementarity should be established from the outset and communicated clearly between MA and coach.

Finally, as the online relationship progressed, the athletes discussed notions of co-orientation, especially in the collaboration of how their goals were integrated in the coach's adaptable programming. Indeed, it was the MA that brought the goals to the coach. Subsequently co-orientation, or the extent to which the coach and athlete concur on the overall quality of their relationship (Jowett, 2017), could be seen as they established common ground, negotiated, discussed how and when the goals could be accomplished, and agreed upon the plans moving forward. Other research into the coached masters sport context suggests that an athlete-centered approach stimulates critical thinking (Zehntner & Penney, 2017), which could be imperative in mutually setting goals and carrying out programming in self-directed ways. However, not all coaches promote the use of questioning for higher order thinking (Callary et al., 2017; Zehntner & Penney, 2017), and without an athlete-centered approach, co-orientation in an online setting could be compromised.

This study is also the first to explore Rathwell et al.'s (2020) AOSCS themes within online CAR. In particular, for the athlete to select a coach, the coach needed to share their knowledge through social media. While Rathwell et al. suggest that the coach should impart coaching knowledge by identifying how their sport experience bears on the information that the coach shares with the athletes, in this study, the MAs used the coach's videos and assumed that the coach could share their applied knowledge. This is somewhat risky, as the best athletes do not always make the best coaches—there are pedagogical skills needed to translate their own physical skills to supporting someone else to develop those skills (Chroni et al., 2020). Since kettlebell sport is still growing, over time coaching skills may become better known and visible through social media; however, at this point, these results point to Masters coaches sharing their sport skills and knowledge through demonstration, as well as letting people know that they can ask them questions. The coaches in Callary et al.'s (2023) study indicated that they did not always feel comfortable imparting coaching knowledge with their MAs, as they wanted the focus to be on the MAs. However, these results indicate that the coaches sharing their own experiences was integral to co-orientation in the CAR. Imparting coaching knowledge was further seen in programming when coaches could show their athletes (through video) how they understood the challenges that the athletes were going through, which allowed the athlete to feel that the coach was relatable, trusting in their programming, and wanting to commit to the training.

The athletes also spoke about the importance of the coach considering their individuality, another AOSCS theme from Rathwell et al. (2020). Early in the formation of the relationship, this involved a lot of bi-directional communication for the coach to know the MA's past experiences and establish what the MA needed on an individual basis. Jenn, Mike, and Erin all discussed initially filling out intake forms while Lucy spoke of interviewing her coach. This demonstrates how the use of intake surveys and interviews also helped the coach know how to push the athletes and how they preferred feedback, linking in well to the adult-oriented coaching practices that respect athletes' preferences for effort, accountability, and feedback (Rathwell et al., 2020). However, as the relationship progressed, the athletes in this study focused less on the communication required for the coach to consider their individuality, presumably because the coach knew this information already. While this could be construed as problematic, the focus of the communication turned instead to how the coach could respect their preferences for effort, accountability, and feedback, being attentive and supporting the MAs in the ways that they knew worked.

In the progression of this relationship, the coach framed learning situations by asking for video of the MA, providing an analysis of the video, and using video as a means for demonstration of what they wanted the MAs to do. The use of video appeared especially important as a means for intellectual stimulation through the MAs' self-analysis of their own performance, as well as sharing and receiving feedback from the coach. Indeed, the use of video is a way in which coaches can frame learning situations that meet the needs of adult learners in the AOSCS (Rathwell et al., 2020) and can be used as an assessment tool. Further, Dionigi et al. (2018) suggest that intellectual stimulation is an important personal asset that adults want from Masters sport. In the online environment, video also created the opportunity for bi-directional conversations that helped to support a positive CAR. Research has shown that video-based performance analysis by the coach can support CAR development and is respected by the athletes when the coach shows organization and professionalism in preparation and delivery of the (in-person) session (Nelson et al., 2011). However, examining how video analysis is used to develop the CAR in online-only settings in sport contexts beyond Masters sport is warranted.

When it comes to programming, the MAs noted that their online coach needs to be adaptable and able to understand their lifestyle in order to program effectively. The participants spoke of the importance of adapting the program by session as needed due to their life obligations, illness, and injury, but also season-long programming. Understanding how the coach can create personalized programming based on MAs' progress has also been shown to be an important adult-oriented coaching practice (Rathwell et al., 2020). In this study, programming was not only important from an adult learning perspective (Callary et al., 2017), but it also demonstrated commitment between the coach and MA, complementarity in behaviors between the coach and athlete in the ways in which the programming was adapted, and co-orientation because of the collaborative process of

developing, negotiating, and attaining the MAs' goals. Thus, programming was a key theme in the online CAR.

Practically, these findings point to the peer-relationship between the coach and MA in online settings. MacLellan et al. (2018) noted that the power dynamics of the CAR are inherently different in Masters sport compared with other sport contexts. For example, while the coach, as an adult, holds a position of authority in youth sport, in Masters sport, the coach and athletes are seen as peers (Callary et al., 2021; MacLellan et al., 2018). Further, MAs' payment for the sport program often means that coaches are in a service position (rather than a power position as seen in high-performance sport; Rathwell et al., 2015). In this study, while the MAs chose a coach who they admired for their athletic abilities, they also wanted a coach that was interested them as athletes. The communication (questions, feedback, and support) about both the coach's and the MA's abilities and behaviors necessitated a mutual respectful and bilateral relationship, confirming the more balanced relationship seen in prior research on in-person coached Masters contexts. Indeed, while the coach's superior skill may have placed them on a pedestal, the MAs also referred to the paid relationship wherein the coach worked for them. Thus, the online CAR was professional, service-oriented, and level.

Conclusion

Given the challenge of an online environment in which the coach and athletes may not see the other's verbal and nonverbal cues in real time (Szedlak et al., 2022), there was potential difficulty in forming online CAR. However, adult athletes are known to initiate and follow-up communication with their coaches (Callary et al., 2017). Previous research into online coached formats had examined the phenomenon from the perspective of restrictions placed on already developed CAR during the pandemic (Szedlak et al., 2022), due to the coach moving to a different location (Bennett, 2020), or as an add-on in use of online technology in coaching (Cushion & Townsend, 2019). The findings from our study extend the research in online coaching and coaching MAs. First, Jowett's 3 + 1Cs (2017) provided conceptual terms to explain how the online CAR formed, progressed, and was supported through programming. Second, the five themes of the AOSCS (Rathwell et al., 2020) were used to understand how coaches used adult-oriented approaches to support the CAR. In totality the results indicated that the use of adult-oriented coaching approaches that are communicated and negotiated with MAs in an online setting can support the development and progression of the CAR. Given the use of the AOSCS as a coach development strategy (Callary et al., 2023), future research could explore the possibilities of using the AOSCS as a reflective tool to support online coaches' development to meet the psychosocial needs of their online athletes.

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