

**TITLE**

Things Ain't What They Used to Be? Coaches Perceptions of Commitment in Developing Athletes

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**JOURNAL**

Journal of Applied Sport Psychology

**DATE DEPOSITED**

11 August 2019

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Things Ain't What They Used to Be? Coaches Perceptions of Commitment  
in Developing Athletes

Date of re-submission: 12th June 2019

26 Abstract

27 Appropriate levels of commitment are fundamental to the adolescent athlete, if they are to be  
28 successful in progressing through their high-performance environments (e.g., Hill,  
29 McNamara, & Collins, 2015). Accordingly, the present study sought to ascertain academy  
30 coaches' perceptions regarding commitment in their developing athletes. Specifically, to  
31 understand the levels of perceived commitment, associated behaviors, commonalities and  
32 contrasts apparent across a range of sporting environments. Semi-structured interviews were  
33 conducted with 12 male UK-based academy coaches ( $M$  age = 41.25,  $SD$  = 8.76 years),  
34 whom worked full time with elite youth performers between the ages of 15 to 18 years. The  
35 sample comprised four soccer coaches, four coaches from other team sports (rugby union,  
36 rugby league, and cricket) and four coaches from individual sports (swimming, tennis, judo,  
37 and badminton), with a mean of 13.67 years' coaching experience ( $SD$  = 8.42 years).  
38 Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified the following overarching  
39 themes: a) what do we want? b) what are they like? and c) what do we do? The study  
40 provides a valuable insight into the ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of the  
41 adolescent athlete, along with current strategies coaches are employing within their practice.  
42 By adding to the understanding of this important area, we hope sporting organizations,  
43 practitioners, parents, and coaches can use the information to tailor their interventions and  
44 service provision accordingly in supporting their athletes negotiate key developmental  
45 opportunities.

46 **Lay summary:** This paper explored academy coaches' perceptions of commitment from  
47 their developing athletes. The study provides a valuable insight into the ideal commitment  
48 characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete, along with current strategies coaches  
49 are employing within their practice from a cross-sport approach.

50 *Keywords:* adolescence, coaching, performance academies, psychology, youth sport

51 Things Ain't What They Used to Be? Coaches Perceptions of Commitment in Developing  
52 Athletes

53 Developing effective performance pathways for the next generation of athletes, is a  
54 long-term strategy of the UK's National Governing Bodies in their quest to produce world-  
55 class performers (UK Sport, 2015). Furthermore, a number of professional sporting  
56 organizations (e.g., soccer, cricket, rugby union, & rugby league) have invested in developing  
57 their academy structures to better prepare their talented junior athletes for senior sporting  
58 success (Finn & McKenna, 2010) and see first-teams populated with academy graduates  
59 (Rowley, Potrac, Knowles, & Lee, 2019). This has included several larger scale initiatives,  
60 for example, the English Premier League's elite player development plan (EPPP), to increase  
61 the capacity and caliber of home-grown players (Premier League, 2016). However, with  
62 professional sporting organizations willing to recruit the highest caliber of players on a global  
63 scale, the uncertainty surrounding opportunities to become world-class and successfully  
64 transition to senior sport, magnifies the importance of athlete commitment throughout the  
65 development pathways (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014; Schnell, Mayer, Diehl,  
66 Zipfel, & Thiel, 2014).

67 Sport commitment is defined as a psychological construct reflecting "the desire and  
68 resolve to continue participation in a sport over time" (Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons,  
69 & Keeler, 1993, p. 7). Motivation to participate in and continue competitive sport is one of  
70 the most extensively studied areas in sport psychology (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002) and the  
71 sport commitment model (Scanlan et al., 1993) provides a theoretical framework to examine  
72 this construct. Building from interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), Rusbult's  
73 (1980) investment model of commitment provided the initial empirical base for the sport  
74 version of the model. The primary proposition of the sport commitment model is that greater  
75 enjoyment, personal investment, involvement opportunities, social constraints, and fewer

76 involvement alternatives should translate into stronger resolve to continue participation; a  
77 suggestion which has been empirically tested in several adolescent sport contexts (e.g.,  
78 Carpenter & Coleman, 1998; Weiss & Weiss, 2007; Weiss, Weiss, & Amorose, 2010).  
79 Alternatively, if developing athletes believe ability leads to success and their current  
80 participation is too time-consuming, stressful or boring, this is likely to detract from their  
81 enjoyment, desire to continue, sustained effort, and participation behavior (Carpenter &  
82 Morgan, 1999; Weiss et al., 2010).

83         A further consideration is that the full-time participation across these performance  
84 academies coincides with the transitional period of adolescence, whereby junior athletes can  
85 experience numerous changes on a physical, psychological, and social level (Schnell et al.,  
86 2014). From a psychological perspective, adolescence is a time for development of the  
87 executive functions; that is, cognitive skills that enable the control and coordination of  
88 thoughts and behavior, generally associated with the prefrontal cortex (Choudhury,  
89 Blakemore, & Charman, 2006). Development of the executive functions mark the beginning  
90 of more complex cognitive processes such as abstract thought, metacognition, problem-  
91 solving, and deductive reasoning (Smith & Handler, 2007). Furthermore, biological changes  
92 in structure and connectivity within the brain interact with increased experience, knowledge,  
93 and changing social demands to produce rapid cognitive growth (Beltz, 2018).

94         As a consequence, Steinberg (2010) describes a maturational imbalance that can occur  
95 between the development of socioemotional and cognitive control systems, contributing to  
96 behavioral characteristics of adolescence. Considering also the requirement for a long-term  
97 commitment to excel in these high-performance environments, the adolescent athlete can  
98 therefore exhibit less than desirable behaviors. For example, across a variety of sports  
99 (cricket, rugby union, soccer) the combination of developing adolescent and high-  
100 performance expectation has led to athletes displaying challenging behaviors, emotional

101 unpredictability, vulnerability, and commitment issues (Devaney, Nesti, Ronkainen,  
102 Littlewood, & Richardson, 2018; Hill, McNamara, & Collins, 2015; Morris, Tod, & Oliver,  
103 2016). These arguably are in contrast to the psychological characteristics (e.g., confidence,  
104 motivation, ability to set and achieve goals) identified as positive features of the development  
105 process (e.g., Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffett, 2002).

106         Interestingly, in the Hill et al. (2015) study, English rugby union academy coaches  
107 and directors deemed commitment to be dual-effect when interviewed regarding the psycho-  
108 behavioral based features of effective talent development in their academy athletes. For  
109 example, as a positive construct, commitment was demonstrated in perseverance, discipline, a  
110 positive work ethic, the ability to sacrifice, and generally in terms of adolescent athletes'  
111 commitment to develop themselves. The construct of over-commitment however, especially  
112 if left unmanaged, was perceived as potentially detrimental to an athlete's development, with  
113 the athlete partaking in well-meaning but misguided developmental activities, for example,  
114 overtraining due to believing 'more is better'. Finally, a lack of commitment was regarded as  
115 a negative psychological construct due to adolescent athletes failing to progress, putting in  
116 minimal effort, and not taking ownership for their development.

117         As such, the scope for further investigating the seemingly adaptive psychological  
118 construct of commitment becomes apparent. Given the necessity for athletes to optimally  
119 negotiate key developmental opportunities (MacNamara, Button, & Collins, 2010), it is  
120 surprising as to the relative dearth of research examining this psychological characteristic that  
121 may both help and hinder the developmental process. Furthermore, this becomes even more  
122 apparent, when taking into account that 15 to 18-year-old athletes are approaching their  
123 junior-to-senior transition, known for its challenging nature (Stambulova, Engström, Franck,  
124 Linnér, & Lindahl, 2015). Therefore, the appropriate levels of commitment are fundamental  
125 to the adolescent athlete, if they are to be successful in progressing through their high-

126 performance pathway or professional academy structures. Accordingly, the primary focus of  
127 this study was to ascertain academy coaches' perceptions regarding commitment in their  
128 developing athletes. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the levels of perceived  
129 commitment and associated behaviors across a range of sporting environments, looking for  
130 commonalities and contrasts which might be apparent.

## 131 **Method**

### 132 **Methodology**

133 The research was located within an interpretive paradigm, through which researchers  
134 aim to discover reality through participant's views, their own background and experiences  
135 (Cresswell, 2007). Accordingly, rich descriptions of academy coaches' perceptions of  
136 commitment in their developing athletes were gathered (Smith & Sparkes, 2017).  
137 Furthermore, the research was underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological  
138 constructionism, whereby an assumption is made that participants may have their own unique  
139 interpretation or perspective of their coaching experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).  
140 Academy coaches' perceptions were accordingly investigated through qualitative semi-  
141 structured interviews, employing inductive thematic analysis strategies to develop and  
142 describe themes that emerged from the data, while using the language of the participants to  
143 fully describe the themes (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2017). Thematic analysis was thus  
144 chosen based on our interpretive paradigm, and as Braun and Clarke (2006) state, can be  
145 applied across a range of epistemological approaches including constructionism.

### 146 **Participants**

147 Following institutional ethical approval and informed consent, 12 UK-based academy  
148 coaches were recruited to participate in this study. The coaches were purposefully selected  
149 on the basis that they worked full time with elite youth performers between the ages of 15 to  
150 18 years. The coaches were all male, Caucasian, ranging in age from 31 to 58 years ( $M =$

151 41.25,  $SD = 8.76$  years). The sample comprised four soccer coaches (English Premier  
152 League Academies), four coaches from other team sports (England Rugby Union Premiership  
153 Academy, Super League Rugby League Academy, and English County Cricket Academy)  
154 and four coaches from individual sports (British Swimming, Lawn Tennis Association,  
155 British Judo, and Great Britain Badminton). Four participants held the position of Academy  
156 Director, a further four were employed as age-group Head Coaches, three as Academy Head  
157 Coach, and one as an Academy Manager. Collectively, participants reported a mean of 13.67  
158 years' coaching experience ( $SD = 8.42$  years) within their respective sports and  
159 predominantly coached male athletes, apart from the individual sports whom coached both  
160 genders.

### 161 **Interview Guide**

162 Interviews followed a semi-structured approach, allowing the researchers to collect  
163 the important information about the topic of interest while giving the participants the  
164 opportunity to report on their own experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Therefore, although  
165 there was a certain element of structure to the interviews, order of questions were dependent  
166 on the response of the participant. This allowed the interviewee the freedom to talk and  
167 ascribe meanings while bearing in mind the broader aims of the study (Smith, 2008).  
168 Interview questions were open-ended to allow the respondent considerable scope to express  
169 their perceptions and expand on views offered (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). Prior to data  
170 collection, a pilot interview was conducted with an assistant coach from a professional soccer  
171 academy. Following this process, no significant changes were made to the actual interview  
172 guide, although the phrasing of two questions were refined for clarity.

173 The final interview guide (available upon request from the first author) was structured  
174 into three sections: ice-breakers, main questions, and concluding questions (Rubin & Rubin,  
175 2005). After asking participants to provide general demographic information, the ice-breaker



176 questions were designed to ascertain a basic understanding of the individual and their  
177 coaching experience. These questions were posed in a conversational manner and included  
178 asking participants to describe their sport, the athletes within the academy setting, and the  
179 specific environment (e.g., To begin, I would like to get to know more about your coaching  
180 role). The main section focused on effort distribution and adopted a scenario-based  
181 approach, whereby participants were asked to imagine three ‘typical’ athletes in their  
182 academy squad: the hard worker, the average athlete, and one who lacks commitment/a work  
183 ethic. With very little variation across participants, these categories were reported as 30%,  
184 40%, and 30% respectively.

185         For each scenario a number of questions were posed (e.g., Could you describe how  
186 hard they work? Can you give me some examples that demonstrate this? What percentage of  
187 your squad are like this? Can you talk me through some of the methods you use to encourage  
188 commitment with your athletes?). A variety of probe and elaboration questions were  
189 employed to ensure complete understanding of respondents’ comments and enable in-depth  
190 answers to be obtained (Malterud, 2001). For concluding questions, participants were asked  
191 to reflect on their responses, and if they had anything else to add. Throughout the interviews,  
192 participants were encouraged to provide examples and discuss specific events that had  
193 occurred during their academy coaching experiences.

#### 194 **Procedure**

195         Participants were invited to take part via email or face-to-face correspondence, both  
196 of which included information regarding the aims and requirements of the study and all  
197 ethical procedures. In an attempt to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, it was made  
198 clear that all identifiable information would be removed, and pseudonyms would be used in  
199 any future publication (see table 1). All of the interviews were conducted by the second

200 author, face to face and at a location of the participant's choosing, lasting for a mean of 66.14  
201 min ( $SD = 10.21$ ).

## 202 **Data Analysis**

203 All interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed verbatim.  
204 A six-stage inductive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was then  
205 conducted by the lead author on the transcripts. In the first instance, transcripts were read  
206 and reread in their entirety until the lead author was familiar with the content, noting down  
207 initial ideas in order to gain an overall sense of the dataset. The second phase involved  
208 generating initial codes which identified key features or points of interest within the  
209 transcripts. Once data were coded, the third element consisted of collating codes into  
210 potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each theme. The fourth stage included the  
211 second and third authors as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018) reviewing the entire  
212 dataset, with further development and refinement of themes to ensure meaningful  
213 representations of the data, for example, debating whether trying to fit too much into a theme  
214 at times and discussing where themes overlap. During the fifth phase, final refinements were  
215 made, generating clear names for each theme to accurately reflect the description and how  
216 they fitted into an overall story in relation to the purpose of the research. The analytic  
217 process continued throughout the final stage through the drafting of written reports. The  
218 reports were read by the co-authors who served to encourage further reflection and ensure a  
219 balance was achieved between data extracts and analytical commentary (Braun et al., 2017).

## 220 **Methodological Rigor**

221 Qualitative research should be judged against criteria that align with the specific  
222 methodology employed in each study (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Accordingly, a number of  
223 steps were integrated into this study to enhance the methodological rigor. Firstly, Braun and  
224 Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist of criteria for determining good thematic analysis was

225 adhered to. These included items relating to the transcription, coding, analysis, overall  
226 process, and the written report. Member reflections offered by participants, were also  
227 employed as a way to help create a meticulous, robust, and intellectually enriched  
228 understanding (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This involved dialogue with the participants  
229 following analysis to explore any gaps or similarities they shared, concerning interpretations  
230 of the findings (Schinke, McGannon, & Smith, 2013). Lastly, the first author engaged with  
231 critical friends (second and third authors) from the fourth-stage of thematic analysis, who  
232 encouraged reflection upon and questioned the emerging interpretations of the data (Smith &  
233 McGannon, 2018).

## 234 **Results**

235 A range of experiences influenced the academy coaches' perceptions of commitment  
236 in their developing athletes. Three major themes were elicited within the inductive analysis  
237 and are presented with representative verbatim quotes: a) what do we want? b) what are they  
238 like? and c) what do we do? (see table 2).

### 239 **What Do We Want?**

240 In this theme, participants discussed the qualities pertaining to the committed athlete  
241 within their academy structures. Specifically, two sub themes emerged: characteristics of the  
242 'ideal' athlete and balancing the performance and winning focus.

243 **Characteristics of the 'ideal' athlete.** The academy athletes in question all met  
244 various physical and technical standards to be selected into these high-performance  
245 environments. Interestingly, coaches discussed how the character of the athletes was right at  
246 the heart of what they are looking for: "So if we get the character right that's what our  
247 priority is, we need to develop the character" (Aaron, Badminton). This was also exemplified  
248 at the organizational level, where Ben (Soccer) highlighted his academy ethos:

249 Our academy is about the person before the player, because at a young age we try and  
250 want them to be humble, hardworking, respectful, and genuinely good characters.

251 Obviously, that isn't always the case but that's what we aim for.

252 With regards to character, there was unanimous agreement on the qualities coaches  
253 wanted to see in their developing athletes: "You know discipline, respect, commitment,  
254 appreciation of values" (Tom, Cricket). These defining features of the hardworking and  
255 committed athlete were irrespective of sport and emphasized as a key characteristic, not only  
256 at the academy level, but also if these athletes were to have a subsequently successful career:  
257 "High levels of commitment are completely necessary in order to fit into the broader culture  
258 of the club and are especially important when it comes to transition to first team" (Jack,  
259 Rugby Union).

260 Underpinning this notion of sustained development, participants noted how their best  
261 athletes: "... take ownership for everything they do" (Gary, Rugby League). This consisted  
262 of coaches stressing the importance of developing independence within their athletes:  
263 "Autonomous and takes enough responsibility for their development as we get them to be  
264 self-regulating athletes" (Jack, Rugby Union). However, a noteworthy take on this was  
265 highlighted by David (Judo) in that, in order to take responsibility for their personal  
266 development, athletes needed to utilize the various support services on offer to them:

267 The best ones in this place are the ones that make use of this place as a whole, use the  
268 psychologist, the nutritionist, the physios, use the S&C guys, they're less dependent  
269 as in the fact that they'll hunt and source these service for themselves. They're  
270 realizing that they can't do it on their own.

271 **Balancing the performance and winning focus.** In the second sub-theme,  
272 participants discussed the reality that their athletes were on a developmental journey: "The  
273 process along the way what would get you that step up the ladder. We say Olympic golds at

274 the top of the ladder, you're not gonna do it in one go, so we try to chunk it down" (Mark,  
275 Swimming). Due to the academy nature of these environments, the importance of the  
276 processes and learning opportunities for these developing athletes was conversed: "You get a  
277 sense of the ones that are fully focused and switched on to doing it...you can see they've got  
278 a real passion to learn and wanna improve" (John, Soccer). It was apparent participants  
279 advocated both outcome and process-based types of focus and the key was achieving the right  
280 balance between the two:

281         Players that are result orientated worry me, they gotta be competitive as hell and  
282         that's the balance, so I want players that are out there developing; they know what  
283         they've gotta do every time they walk on the tennis court, they know what they're  
284         trying to do to improve. (Nathan, Tennis)

285         Moreover, there was an undisputed opinion from coaches not to underplay the  
286         performance side of sport, winning is inherently important. Thus, all interviewed wanted this  
287         balance between results today and development for tomorrow:

288         I think they're getting used to the fact they don't just rely on the end score; this is not  
289         first team football this is not results driven business. Don't get me wrong, I wanna  
290         win every football game but not if at the same time they're making mistakes for fun  
291         and the other team's not good enough to punish us, I don't think you should as a  
292         coach ever come away and go yeah, we was great today we won 5-0. (James, Soccer)

### 293 **What Are They Like?**

294         As opposed to discussing the type of athletes participants ideally wanted, the next  
295         theme concerned the reality of what coaches were actually getting within their academy  
296         environments, with three sub themes emerging: relationship between commitment and talent,  
297         maturity or lack of, and what's driving these athletes?

298           **Relationship between commitment and talent.** A recurring theme was apparent  
299 across all participants regarding the perceived relationship between commitment and talent:  
300           Majority of them are committed and hardworking, however you have the ones that  
301           aren't and unfortunately, they're often the ones that are the very talented, the  
302           mavericks if you like; they're the ones that could make the top level. (Ben, Soccer)  
303           This was in contrast to the ideal characteristics previously discussed, with participants  
304           observing less than favorable attributes in many of their most talented athletes: "If I had to  
305           name the top 10 players I've ever coached, I'd probably say three or four of them you could  
306           deem as lazy" (John, Soccer). From a more global perspective, Paul (Rugby League) spoke  
307           about this being part and parcel of all youth sport: "There's so much talent with these kids,  
308           but I think whatever environment you have, the best in the world or the worst, I think you'll  
309           always get them individuals".

310           Discussing the reasons for this lack of commitment, participants were passionate in  
311           their perceived underlying causes:

312           The problem is 'cos of the talent, we're talking about (names club) it's because the  
313           talent is exceptional. At that given time and as an under 16-year-old they're not just a  
314           good player, they're bordering best in the country or the top 10 in Europe and they  
315           become aware of that because of everything that surrounds them. (John, Soccer)

316           It was acknowledged that, because of this exceptional talent, academy players may  
317           have already started to reap the rewards without being fully committed: "They think getting  
318           picked in the academy is the be all and end all; no it's not, it's irrelevant; it's just an  
319           opportunity for you to step to the next level" (Tom, Cricket). The nature of the academy  
320           programmes being full-time was deemed an influential factor in this relationship, with  
321           coaches perceiving youth athletes becoming a bit blasé: "The early professionalization for me  
322           is because they're in academy too soon and it becomes a norm... You get in the academy now

323 it's harder to get out than get in" (Ben, Soccer). Similarly, coaches expressed their frustration  
324 with having to commit to individuals earlier on: "Familiarity can breed complacency and they  
325 can get comfortable and content; this is just what we do every day" (John, Soccer). Gary  
326 (Rugby League) resonated with this from his coaching experience, where problems were  
327 perceived to result from athletes not wanting to put the work in that is required at this level:  
328 "If I'm honest with you I don't think they wanna work hard enough, that's the issue". This  
329 was further emphasized as a lack of self-awareness of what is required, with some athletes  
330 not committed to applying themselves outside of their scheduled training:

331       They believe that walking through the door here twice a day and just getting in and  
332       going through the motions is enough to get them to the top and it's not. That's four  
333       out of 24 hours a day, it's what you're doing in those other 20 hours. (Mark,  
334       Swimming)

335       Coaches gave an honest insight into how it affected them to see this lack of  
336       commitment in some of their most talented athletes:

337       Very disappointing to a point where I get too frustrated with the fact they're not  
338       working hard. Can't see why they wouldn't when they've got all the trappings that  
339       they could have from all the rewards for hard work. 'Cos the ones that I'm talking  
340       about, they're the ones that have the talent to actually get to the top. (Ryan, Soccer)

341 For David (Judo), a similar emotive response was shared in relation to some of his most  
342 talented athletes missing training sessions: "Will go and pick up medals still, but not done the  
343 work, not done the graft for it, and that to me is upsetting because I think Christ what could  
344 you be like if you did do that?" The feelings of upset, disappointment, and frustration  
345 expressed by the coaches led Mark (Swimming) to admit: "I'd rather have a less talented but  
346 totally committed athlete in the group than somebody who's got all the talent in the world but  
347 doesn't want to invest". As a thought-provoking point to this sub theme, Ben (Soccer)

348 questioned whether you are likely to see any improvements with the lesser committed  
349 athletes: “I’m not a specialist in behaviors, but when I see kids at 14, 15, 16 and they’re lazy,  
350 they’re arrogant, they’re not hard working, you can guarantee they’ll be the same at 25, 26,  
351 27, 28”.

352 **Maturity or lack of!** Participants repeatedly reported there was not a lack of ability  
353 or talent in their academy athletes. Instead: “There is a lack of maturity in how that player  
354 operates, how independent he is, how much the parent runs their lives, make decisions, does  
355 everything for them” (Tom, Cricket). This was in contrast to earlier descriptions of the ideal  
356 characteristics, whereby coaches promoted the development of independence in their athletes.  
357 However, whether the parents of these athletes were also promoting independence was  
358 frequently questioned by the coaches: “They want them to do well, but sometimes they have  
359 to let go of them and say find your feet, make some decisions on how you’re gonna operate  
360 on your own” (Paul, Rugby League). In relation to this lack of independence, coaches also  
361 shared reflections when taking their athletes to tournaments:

362 That’s probably one thing I look at when I go to overseas junior events, I will feel that  
363 our players are just a little bit behind on a maturity level. I just see Europeans a bit  
364 more self-assured, a bit more worldliness about them.

365 Nathan (Tennis) acknowledged that, although this could be a generalization, he also  
366 had observed British players being less independent and maturing later in comparison to their  
367 European counterparts. Again, parents were deemed influential in these levels of maturity:  
368 “You want great parental support, but they can’t wrap them in cotton wool. It’s tough for  
369 parents because this day and age they want to, and duty of care and stuff is huge now”  
370 (Nathan, Tennis). One of the perceived issues with this lack of maturity was expressed by  
371 James (Soccer): “You’re trying to make boys realize but no matter how many times you say  
372 or the type of message you give them, some of them just literally won’t pick it up until they



373 mature". This had implications for the coaches in terms of their athletes not taking on board  
374 the information they were trying to convey. When considering the purpose of the academy  
375 set-ups across the respective sports, a potential shortcoming was highlighted due to this:

376         There's an immaturity in some of our players, they don't work out what you want  
377         them to work out as a 15, 16, 17 year old, it may take them until they're 22, 23, 24.  
378         The trouble is at 22, 23, 24 they've been bypassed, or their moment's gone. (Tom,  
379         Cricket)

380         **What's driving these athletes?** A clear sport divide was apparent when participants  
381         discussed the motives driving their athletes. Only the soccer coaches referred to the  
382         "financial benefits" (Ryan, Soccer) and external sources:

383         Nowadays it's changed massively I think fame, but that's instant fame, instant likes  
384         on social media, liked by a million followers on Twitter, I wanna be a millionaire,  
385         and I want the best girlfriend on my arm. Great if that's what's driving you in training  
386         every day go and do it, but it can't be detrimental to your training. (Ben, Soccer)

387         Due to the perceived rewards and external benefits, the soccer coaches also recounted  
388         peculiar motives within their sport, stemming from socio-economic influences: "We've  
389         worked with players that have come from horrible backgrounds that are probably getting  
390         driven by wanting better for the people around them" (John).

391         In contrast, coaches from the other team sports described more internal motives  
392         driving their athletes: "It won't be money; at the start when they first come in, it's that love of  
393         the game, enjoy playing, they wanna be with their mates" (Tom, Cricket). From an  
394         individual sport perspective, Aaron (Badminton) spoke about the personal achievements and  
395         medal opportunities driving his athletes at European, World, and Olympic level: "That's what  
396         it means to them and that's what it means to us, so the sport in itself recognizes that, it  
397         doesn't recognize the financial gain". Personal achievements were also brought to life by

398 David (Judo), who emphasized the importance of a task orientation, such as effort and skill  
399 development: “There are no external motivations; you do it to achieve your own goal, your  
400 own gratification; you wanna be as great as you can be as a person in that sport as an athlete”.

401 Participants further expanded these explanations of what was driving their athletes,  
402 concluding that: “If I’m honest I don’t care really as long as I know what motivates them”  
403 (Gary, Rugby League). This notion of taking the time to understand the individual athlete,  
404 regardless of the sport, was supported by James (Soccer):

405 They’re all individual, part of the challenge as a coach is to find out what drives him,  
406 it makes your job easier. But there are also some lads that have an inner drive that  
407 might be something that you know nothing about...but at the same time I think some  
408 of them are not driven at all.

#### 409 **What Do We Do?**

410 The next theme aimed to understand the different strategies coaches employed to either  
411 deal with the characteristics associated with a lack of commitment or promote the ideal  
412 behaviors in their academy athletes. Four sub themes were as follows: use of role models,  
413 good old-fashioned honesty, punishment versus praise, and sending messages their way.

414 **Use of role models.** A variation was evident between coaches using high-profile  
415 athletes within the academy set-ups. From one end of the continuum, Nathan (Tennis)  
416 mentioned a high-profile athlete he uses within his sport: “We’ve been fortunate enough to  
417 have Andy Murray as our big role model over the past sort of 10 years now and Andy is  
418 known for being one of the most committed athletes out there”. High-profile role models  
419 were considered to have a greater impact, in terms of the important messages coaches wanted  
420 to get across to their athletes: “Bring someone in who’s been there and done it, who the  
421 athlete respects and looks up to, and same event they swim, to sit down and try and tease

422 those things out of them” (Mark, Swimming). Alternatively, the following quote depicts  
423 reasoning for coaches using different levels of role models:

424         We’d use a lot of senior role models and by senior I don’t always just mean (names  
425         ex-player); it’s players that are in the year above or two years above in the academy,  
426         so a closer level to them. I think sometimes the elite examples are too high. (John,  
427         Soccer)

428         Coaches shared experiences where they had selected athletes from the age group  
429         above, with the aim of demonstrating the hard work and commitment characteristics required  
430         in the sport: “You just create a situation where they are working alongside; they might see the  
431         difference, they witness it and experience it” (Aaron, Badminton). Building on from this,  
432         John (Soccer) gave an example from his coaching practice where he purposefully pairs up a  
433         hard-working athlete with another from the same age group, whose mentality he would class  
434         as lazy, in the hope that the committed player influences them. “I think you’ve gotta drop in  
435         little things that influence as opposed to change, I think it’s very difficult to change people,  
436         you’ve just gotta influence their behavior”. A similar sentiment was expressed by Nathan  
437         (Tennis) as something he spends time contemplating when selecting players for training  
438         camps: “Surrounding them with the right type of players, for me is critical, they’re role  
439         models in their own right. Players with not so good characteristics they hopefully imitate  
440         those players”. This notion of changing players’ characteristics through imitation, led some  
441         coaches to admit it was even worth keeping players contracted because of their influence:  
442         “Three or four in each age group that are never gonna make it at our club, they might not  
443         even make it the next level down, but what they are gonna do is help the other lads” (Ben,  
444         Soccer).

445         **Good old-fashioned honesty.** Another key approach which coaches advocated

446 within their environments was the importance of being honest with their athletes: “There’s a  
447 huge amount of honesty coming out from me, and from our staff cos you know it’d be  
448 difficult not to deliver in a similar way” (Tom, Cricket). This was reiterated by James  
449 (Soccer) as a necessary step in trying to change his players’ behaviors: “Being up front and  
450 honest with lads and telling them when they ain’t doing it is certainly the way that I would  
451 always work, the more you skate around it the longer it’ll go on”. Aaron (Badminton) went  
452 on to describe how he tries to understand the individual athlete by having a number of honest  
453 conversations:

454         We agree this person’s lazy then you have a conversation and find out something  
455         completely different is happening in their life, which is manifesting itself in the  
456         appearance of laziness. So, you go back to trying to understand the person and the  
457         character rather than just diving into what the issue is.

458         An association to being honest with their athletes was also made by the coaches with  
459 regard to the reality of progressing from the academy set-up: “We have to keep reminding  
460 them of that reality as well; you need to let them know that obviously to be a player at (names  
461 club) that is going to be very few and far between” (James, Soccer). This was also used with  
462 players who were consistently demonstrating a lack of commitment within their current  
463 academy environment: “You know if this isn’t fucking stopping you’re gonna be away from  
464 (names club) don’t think it’s gonna be easy when you leave here”. Ben (Soccer) described  
465 this as the shock tactic and something he reverts to as a last resort if other strategies have not  
466 had the required impact. As an adjunct to this, Ryan (Soccer) explained he used this reality  
467 check as a motivational tool: “You also need to remind them that the opportunity to be a  
468 footballer is right in front of them because they’re already on the ladder”. Ryan further  
469 stressed the importance of coaches reminding their players, regardless of the sport, that this  
470 opportunity is within their grasp.

471           **Punishment versus praise.** Within the academy environments, all the soccer  
472 coaches implemented physical punishments with the aim to change their athletes' behaviors  
473 and made these sanctions either individual or team based for their respective sport. An  
474 example of a team-based sanction was described by John (Soccer): "It's a set of line runs  
475 with clap press ups in between, basically something that physically is horrible, no one enjoys  
476 it, the whole team does it". Ryan (Soccer) provided an interesting take on this, adopted from  
477 the military: "If for example, somebody is letting the team down, the rest of the team gets  
478 punished to do extra work. He isn't involved and has to watch it from outside". Conversely,  
479 coaches from the other sports did not support the use of physical punishment, believing it to  
480 either be a waste of time: "There's no learning in that, there's nothing new" (David, Judo) or  
481 as Jack (Rugby Union) explained: "When is training hard ever gonna be a punishment? That  
482 should be just what we do around here". The coaches' recounted that their experiences were,  
483 in part, influenced by the poor performances or attitudes of their players. Gary (Rugby  
484 League) discussed how, following a defeat which he attributed to a lack of commitment,  
485 instead of physical punishment, he got the whole rugby team to complete jobs around the  
486 training ground: "It's that message of we need to show working hard, what they're going to  
487 be doing with their lives if they're not applying themselves. So, there's a message behind it".  
488 Finally, Tom (Cricket) debated what he could take away from his cricketers that might affect  
489 them enough to change their behavior: "I hate pulling players out of games because that's  
490 what we play for, I've probably got the ultimate sanction is remove them from the  
491 programme, but that's like the end of the road".

492           Conversely, the coaches reflected how it's just as important to praise their players as  
493 it is to punish or let them know when they are not doing something correctly: "It's  
494 encouraging and praising them I think at the right times" (Nathan, Tennis). This transpired as  
495 the athletes feeling like they have been rewarded for their behaviors: "Showing some reward

496 and generally it is only positive feedback of we like what you're doing" (Paul, Rugby  
497 League). James (Soccer) also stressed the important of praising his players, but extended this  
498 by ensuring the individual knows why they are receiving this acclaim:

499       It's just as important to praise the ones that are leading by example, are always on  
500       time, whether it'll be praise in front of the group, team selection, certain perks of the  
501       group, you need to make sure that you do reward them in whatever way you see fit,  
502       but at the same time make sure that it's known what reason it's for.

503       **Sending messages their way.** Across the different sports, coaches expressed the  
504       importance of staying up to date with technology in terms of how they were communicating  
505       with their academy athletes: "I think kids are all social media... visually learning,  
506       communication is at its peak. They're always texting, so we do a lot of video stuff with  
507       them" (Ben, Soccer). Potentially due to the age of the academy athletes, the use of video was  
508       a key aid in how coaches are trying to get their messages across:

509       This generation of players learn through watching, the slightly older ones they don't  
510       actually like watching themselves...It's interesting the younger ones wanna watch  
511       themselves all the time, that's how they learn. The most powerful report I do now is  
512       not a written report it's video footage, show that's the way you do it. (Nathan, Tennis)

513       In addition to the athletes watching themselves, coaches also searched for video  
514       footage across different sports that represented commitment, or the associated characteristics:

515       We'll have a little browse on YouTube where you go oh that's decent just fire it  
516       round...Receiving a four-minute video on WhatsApp is their world as opposed to  
517       come and sit in a class room and look at a big screen I think. (John, Soccer)

518       A different use of WhatsApp was described by Jack (Rugby Union) with one of his  
519       players who struggled to be self-disciplined: "At the end of each day he'll send over what  
520       he's done...I suppose as a result of feeling like he needed somebody standing over him and

521 telling him what to do”. Jack did reflect on this clearly not being the end result of what they  
522 aim for with their players however: “This WhatsApp group was used as a bit of a scaffold to  
523 help him”.

524 On the flip side to all the positives of technology, John (Soccer) highlighted how  
525 social media could undo or promote contrasting messages to his academy athletes:

526 We work in a world where you go on Twitter or Instagram after a game and a player  
527 could’ve had an absolute stinker and straight away what you see is hundreds or  
528 thousands of comments from supporters going brilliant performance tonight.

529 Responding to this, John went on to explain that he would sit down with the player  
530 and spend time showing video evidence to counteract these comments: “I’ll show you it and  
531 go no that is not it and that will always trump; if he doesn’t see it then he’s got no chance in  
532 the game”. As a summary to the different strategies presented, Ben (Soccer) provided a  
533 pertinent conclusion regarding the idiosyncratic nature of the youth performers he coaches:

534 You’ve just gotta find out what works for the lad in my opinion and try and take away  
535 your own beliefs in it because not everyone’s gonna have the same beliefs as me.

536 We’re not all made the same and so yeah you gotta find what works for the kid.

### 537 **Discussion**

538 The current study aimed to obtain academy coaches’ perceptions regarding  
539 commitment in their developing athletes. Given, National Governing Body (NGB) and  
540 professional sporting organization initiatives to produce world-class performers, this is a  
541 pivotal time for athletes to negotiate key developmental opportunities. Therefore, appropriate  
542 levels of commitment are seen as fundamental to the adolescent athlete, if they are to be  
543 successful in progressing through their high-performance pathway or professional academy  
544 structures. Findings have subsequently provided an intuitive insight to the perceived levels of  
545 commitment and associated behaviors across a range of sporting environments. Overall, the

546 interviews revealed a consistent message regarding the differences between the ideal  
547 commitment characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete, which accordingly  
548 influenced the strategies coaches employed.

549         With this in mind, there was unanimous agreement across the participants regarding  
550 the defining features of the hardworking and committed athlete, including being humble,  
551 respectful, disciplined, having an appreciation of values, taking ownership for development,  
552 and genuinely being good characters. These characteristics have previously been identified  
553 as positive features of the development process (e.g., Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Gould et  
554 al., 2002). Moreover, it was encouraging to see the coaches in this study emphasizing and  
555 conversing the importance of the processes and learning opportunities for their developing  
556 athletes, while finding the balance with a results orientation (cf. Duda, 2001; Harwood &  
557 Beauchamp, 2007). However, whether each of the high-performance pathway or professional  
558 academies successfully promoted these positive characteristics and environments was an  
559 interesting topic of discussion by the participants. For instance, cultural and organizational  
560 differences (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) were apparent across the sports with regards to  
561 their set-ups, coaching practices, athletes, and specific motives and rewards. These  
562 idiosyncrasies may provide reasons why some environments seemed to work better than  
563 others in facilitating the committed athlete. The soccer coaches, for example, noted how the  
564 early specialization (players are recruited to soccer academies at age eight, i.e., as under  
565 nine's) and full-time nature of their programmes was deemed an influential factor in some of  
566 their athletes becoming complacent, blasé, and already perceiving to reap the rewards without  
567 being fully committed. This therefore highlights a wider issue for the NGBs and professional  
568 sporting organizations, regarding the impact of their current structure and practices for  
569 developing the next generation of athlete.



570           Across these high-performance environments, there was a recurring theme regarding  
571 the relationship between the most talented athletes displaying the least committed attitudes  
572 and behaviors. Specifically, coaches expressed consistent emotive responses of upset,  
573 disappointment, and frustration when seeing their athletes potentially squander development  
574 opportunities by engaging in maladaptive behaviors and challenging attitudes. According to  
575 the sport commitment model (Scanlan et al., 1993), enjoyment, affiliation, challenge, and  
576 rewards are commonly cited as reasons for participating in competitive sport. Conversely,  
577 developing athletes who believe ability leads to success rather than effort have been linked to  
578 less adaptive responses such as, boredom, negative attitudes, and a lack of enjoyment (e.g.,  
579 Carpenter & Morgan, 1999; Weiss et al., 2010). Offering an additional explanation, the  
580 adolescent athlete experiences maturational imbalances between the development of  
581 socioemotional and cognitive control systems, leading them to exhibit less than desirable  
582 behaviors (Schnell et al., 2014; Steinberg, 2010). Similar to this study's findings, previous  
583 researchers have also discovered the combination of the developing adolescent and high-  
584 performance expectations have led to athletes displaying challenging behaviors, emotional  
585 unpredictability, vulnerability, and commitment issues (Devaney et al., 2018; Hill, et al.,  
586 2015; Morris et al., 2016). It would seem sensible for coaches engaged at this level to receive  
587 knowledge and support focused on dealing with these challenges; arguably a more important  
588 issue than the technical/tactical emphasis which characterizes many coach education  
589 schemes.

590           In a similar vein, a discrepancy was apparent between the coaches' ideal characteristic  
591 of independence and the lack of maturity they encountered in their academy athletes. Due to  
592 the ages of these developing athletes, parents were unsurprisingly deemed influential in this  
593 characteristic (Côté, 1999; Holt & Dunn, 2004). Researchers have tended to focus on the  
594 broad contribution of parents to the development of talented athletes, in addition to specific

595 positive (supportive) and negative (pressurizing) influences on children's psychosocial  
596 experiences (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2015; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010).  
597 However, as Dorsch, Smith, and Dotterer (2016) identified, the distinction between  
598 pressuring behaviors as negative and supportive behaviors as positive, is not necessarily as  
599 straight-forward a dichotomy as it seems. For example, the coaches in this study discussed  
600 how seemingly positive supportive parents contributed to their developing athletes  
601 demonstrating a lack of maturity in how they operate, an inability to take on board messages,  
602 a lack of independence to make their own decisions, and not taking ownership for their  
603 development. Sporting parents may therefore need to facilitate developing levels of  
604 independence, beyond their child's physical maturation years, if they are to successfully  
605 transition to senior sport (Schnell et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2015). Although  
606 researchers have begun to study the complexities and challenges of being a sport parent (e.g.,  
607 Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017), this warrants an interesting avenue for future research  
608 investigation. It may be that parenting a performer requires a subtly different skillset to that  
609 needed to parent a child! A particular issue in the face of the growing number of commercial  
610 providers of parent support.

611         Of course, addressing these derailment issues is best addressed as a total environment  
612 challenge. For example, the impact of talented academy athletes exhibiting less than  
613 desirable behaviors, missing development opportunities, and maturing beyond their key  
614 transition periods, raises important implications for sport psychologists working within these  
615 high-performance environments. This firstly might include raising awareness of what is  
616 required across the development pathways and secondly to try and modify these challenging/  
617 maladaptive attitudes and behaviors; both perhaps best attempted at pre-adolescent ages.  
618 From an applied sport psychology perspective, the cognitive-behavioral model has frequently  
619 been cited as the predominant approach within this field (e.g., Fortin-Guichard et al. 2018;

620 McArdle & Moore, 2012; Winter & Collins, 2015). The approach lends itself to the issues  
621 identified by the coaches in this study, in that the cognitive-behavioral model advocates  
622 allocating appropriate techniques to focus on both changes in problem behavior and  
623 transforming maladaptive cognitions to those that are readily adaptable (Burton & Raedeke,  
624 2008). This is certainly the idea which underpins approaches such as the Psychological  
625 Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDEs – MacNamara et al., 2010) where skills are  
626 taught, tested, and refined as an explicit part of the developmental curriculum. Concerningly,  
627 however, participants noted how they had habitually seen these maladaptive attitudes and  
628 behaviors remaining unchanged in the athletes they coached. It is outside the scope of this  
629 research, to comment whether sport psychology provision was currently in place within each  
630 of these high-performance environments. Alternatively, whether consultation was focused at  
631 a group or organizational level and hence sufficient time was not allocated to facilitate  
632 individual consultation and subsequent behavior change to occur. Regardless, it warrants the  
633 sporting organizations and sport psychology community to reflect on their current support  
634 programmes and consider the nuances of working with the talented adolescence athlete.  
635 Future research would therefore benefit from case studies examples, where practitioners have  
636 successfully impacted on commitment issues and subsequent modification of maladaptive  
637 behaviors and attitudes.

638       Regarding the reported strategies by the coaches, an interesting finding was the use of  
639 technology in the ‘sending messages their way’ sub theme of this study. With increases in  
640 social media use, it can be perceived as a negative distraction, however the coaches in this  
641 study embraced technological advancements to communicate with their academy athletes  
642 (e.g., Gould, Nalepa, & Mignano, 2019). This included the use of WhatsApp, YouTube, and  
643 video, for disseminating specific sporting footage to represent commitment and associated  
644 characteristics, as supporting evidence for athlete development, and as a platform for coaches

645 to convey their messages. Sport psychologists working within these high-performance  
646 pathway or professional academy environments often use educational workshops as their  
647 mode of delivery (Sharp, Woodcock, Holland, Cumming, & Duda, 2013). Workshops enable  
648 an educational platform from which to stage a discursive environment focused on sport  
649 psychology skills and techniques (Gould, Petlichkoff, Hodge, & Simons, 1990;  
650 Poczwardowski & Lauer, 2006). However, interestingly, some of the coaches highlighted  
651 how receiving a short video on WhatsApp is more suited to the adolescent athlete than the  
652 traditional method of sitting in a classroom for a 40-minute to 1-hour educational workshop.  
653 This, therefore, may be an opportune time and demographic for sport psychology  
654 practitioners to embrace the use of technology within their applied work (e.g., Murphy 2009;  
655 Pitt et al., 2015).

656         A final finding was the strategic way coaches used role models within their  
657 performance environments. In addition to high-profile sporting role models,  
658 coaches discussed how they would purposefully create situations whereby their athletes work  
659 alongside or be paired-up with a hard-working athlete in the hope their commitment attitudes  
660 and behaviors would have a positive influence. Most often called observational learning,  
661 modeling, imitation, or vicarious experience, this is a process of observing the actions of  
662 another person and subsequently adapting one's own actions accordingly (e.g., McCullough,  
663 Law, & Ste Marie, 2012). In offering further insight to applied practitioners, coaches  
664 reported how they would retain or keep less talented athletes contracted, based on their  
665 influential mentality. In his account of social learning theory, Bandura (1977) noted that  
666 unlike imitation, observational learning is characterized by enduring changes in an  
667 individual's actions. For this to occur, Bandura proposed four underlying functions: the  
668 learner should pay attention to relevant information; that retention of the information should  
669 occur; the desired behavior should be accurately reproduced; and there should be adequate

670 motivation to do so. Therefore, according to this theory, attentional processes play a pivotal  
671 role if athletes are to learn and be influenced through observation. Mere exposure to a  
672 committed and hard-working athlete does not guarantee any adoption or enduring changes in  
673 an individual's actions, especially if there is a lack of desire to do so (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja,  
674 2002). It would, therefore, be pragmatic for future researchers to test this empirically within  
675 different sporting environments.

676         While the present study exemplifies a range of interesting findings regarding academy  
677 coaches' perceptions of commitment in their developing athletes, it is not without limitations.  
678 It is apparent that, although there are many idiosyncrasies in different sports, there are also  
679 many similarities. Nevertheless, the results of this study must be considered within the  
680 sporting environments the coaches were employed and do not necessarily represent the  
681 experiences of all UK academy environments or high-performance pathways (Lyle, 2018).  
682 Given that the social environment and, by extension, the cultural milieu can play a significant  
683 role, it would be worth future research exploring the extent that these findings are  
684 generalizable to other countries, cultural contexts, and indeed other sports (e.g., aesthetic  
685 sports, for example). Coaches and applied practitioners intending to use these findings to  
686 impact their delivery, should therefore bear this in mind. On the other hand, Carradice,  
687 Shankland, and Beail (2002) believe that, when considering a qualitative study, the research  
688 should be evaluated by the applicability of the concepts to other situations and to others  
689 involved in the phenomenon. We therefore propose 'naturalistic generalizability' (Smith,  
690 2018) and encourage readers to make connections where appropriate, look for overlaps in  
691 their own sporting environments, and selectively transfer the applicable findings.

692         Limitations notwithstanding, this study provides a valuable insight into the  
693 perspective of academy coaches regarding commitment in their developing athletes. We  
694 highlight this as an important area of focus for sporting organizations, researchers,

695 practitioners, parents, and coaches who aim to support their athletes negotiate key  
696 developmental opportunities and successfully progress to senior sport. Findings have  
697 outlined pertinent differences between the ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of  
698 the adolescent athlete, along with current strategies coaches are employing within their  
699 practice. Specifically, by adding to the understanding and persistence of this issue, we hope  
700 practitioners can use the information to tailor their interventions and service provision  
701 accordingly. As one of several examples, practitioners might consider how they might  
702 develop *and* deploy mental skills and environmental parameters to help athletes achieve well  
703 operationalized desirable behaviors (cf. Collins, MacNamara, & Cruikshank, 2018).

704         Finally, by adopting a cross-sport approach, we offer NGBs an opportunity to look  
705 outside their own sporting organizations in seeking best practice recommendations. The  
706 similarity of challenge across the sports examined, against the varied approaches used to  
707 address it, would suggest great benefit in coaches sharing ideas and practice across similar  
708 domains as well as within their own sporting pathways.

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