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Title: Coaches' implementation strategies in providing social support to Singaporean university athletes : A case study

Year: 2019

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

Koh, K. T., Kokkonen, M., & Law, H. R. B. (2019). Coaches' implementation strategies in providing social support to Singaporean university athletes : A case study. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 14(5), 681-693. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747954119876099>

Manuscript ID SPO-19-0174 - Coaches' Implementation Strategies in Providing Social Support to
Singaporean University Athletes: A Case Study

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3rd Re-submission Date: August 25, 2019

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ABSTRACT

Coaches are effective providers of social support to their athletes. Although sport specific measures of social support have been developed to better understand athletes' perceptions of available support, limited amount of research has addressed how sport coaches implement specific social support strategies. The purpose of this study was to examine university coaches' implementation strategies in providing various forms of social support to their athletes. A total of eight sport coaches from team and individual sports (four from each sport) were purposefully selected for this study. Coaches were individually interviewed. The interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis. The results revealed that coaches from different sports shared similar strategies across emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible dimensions, but with some distinguishable differences in the way these strategies were implemented. In documenting the lived experiences of sport coaches, key strategies valued highly amongst these coaches were highlighted, providing important implications for coaches to know how to incorporate these strategies into their coaching practice to better support athletes' well-being, and improve the quality of coaching. The findings also provide an implementation framework of social support that emphasizes key strategies for coaches to focus on in their coaching approaches.

Keywords

Social support, strategies, university athletes, sport coaching

53 INTRODUCTION

54 Social support has been recognized as playing an essential role in athletes' lives. It has improved
55 athletes' mental well-being through its positive associations with facilitating competitive stress
56 management [1], lower perceived stress, global burnout, emotional/physical exhaustion [2], and
57 lower occurrence of symptoms of common mental disorders [3]. In a study by Cosh and Tully [4],
58 social support has proved to be of importance in athletes' reduced vulnerability to injury. It also
59 increased likelihood of heightened levels of functioning (i.e. sport injury-related growth) [5],
60 satisfaction [6], as well as lower level of anxiety after the injury [7-8]. Furthermore, social support
61 appears to be important in overcoming adversity in athletic career [9], and in various athletic career
62 transitions, for instance, when transitioning from the amateur sport to professional sport [10], from
63 youth sport to senior sport [11-12], and finally, in adjusting to retirement from elite sport [13-14].

64 In general, social support refers to aid and assistance that are exchanged through social
65 relationships and interpersonal transactions [15, p. 191]. The functional approach to social support,
66 which is the basis for the current study, focuses on specific forms of social support – emotional,
67 esteem, informational, and tangible. It can be either received or provided, as differentiated by
68 Schwarzer and Knoll [16]. These four forms of social support are seen as important components
69 that are linked to specific needs of the individual receiving social support [17]. In sports
70 particularly, four forms of perceived social support from friends, family, teammates, and coaches
71 have received research attention in the past years [18-19]. Perceived comfort and security provided
72 by others (emotional support), support of one's sense of competence or self-esteem (esteem
73 support), advice or guidance (informational support) and concrete instrumental assistance (tangible
74 support) have shown to be beneficial in many ways due to their associations with athletic
75 performance (e.g. [20-21], self-confidence [18-19], and injury rehabilitation [22]). However,
76 information regarding the implementation strategies incorporating the four forms of social support
77 remains broad and limited [23]. Similarly, not much is known of how coaches' perceived social
78 support strategies are implemented. Adopting the functional approach to examine how coaches'

implementation strategies in providing the emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support to their athletes are at the heart of our current paper.

Prior research on social support in sport, as highlighted by and partially shown in the above-mentioned studies, has mainly focused on how perceived social support leads to positive outcomes. The focus of this article is, however, on the implementation strategies employed by coaches in providing social support to their athletes, which is critical in sport coaching as argued by Adams et al. [11]. Indeed, collegiate coaches have been found to implement socially supportive acts into their everyday interactions with injured athletes [24]. In a study of intercollegiate coaches' experiences and strategies for coaching first-year athletes, Kim, Bloom and Bennie [25] found that the success of the coaches were a result of their abilities to build a supportive team environment for first-year athletes through strong interpersonal trust, patience, and good leadership from senior athletes. Some literature has also been useful in identifying the sources of social support and educating parents, coaches and teammates on the roles they play [11], and in exploring factors that optimize the provision of social support to elite athletes [26]. Despite this promising development, a systematic review by Sheridan, Coffee, and Lavalley [27] revealed that there is a lack of extensive studies on social support in youth sport at the collegiate level.

More research is also needed in the Asian's context as most of the studies on providing social support to athletes have been conducted in western countries. An exception worth noting is the study of Jeon, Lee, and Kwon [28] that demonstrated how social support from important others, including coaches, positively affected both directly and indirectly via enhanced self-compassion of subjective well-being of Korean elite high school and university student athletes. In addition, Lu et al. [29] found that the resilience of the Taiwanese college student athletes and their coaches' informational and tangible support conjunctively moderated the stress-burnout relation in high and low stress conditions. More recently, Chan [30] reported that Taiwanese college athlete's perceived social support from their parents, friends, and significant others were linked to their career choices and beliefs about their capacity to make career-related decisions. Furthermore, collegiate student

athletes in Japanese perceived social support closely linked to positive self-schema [31], and the amount of social support provided to the teammates [32]. However, despite these recent positive findings on the importance of providing social support to athletes in some Asian countries, there is a need for a better understanding of the implementation strategies relevant to the social support process provided by competitive sport coaches at the university level, as opposed to school or college-based coaches who have previously been studied to a greater extent [e.g. 28-32]. The purpose of this study was to examine Singaporean university coaches' implementation strategies in providing various forms of social support to their athletes. Specifically, what kind of social support strategies coaches make available to their athletes? The findings will be useful to inform future coaching practice in developing athletes' well-being.

METHOD

This study was guided by the interpretivist approach [33] which assumes that knowledge is relative to the context (i.e. relativistic ontology) and is interpreted and constructed (i.e. constructionistic epistemology) by individuals. Yin [34] stated that a case study is suited to develop a deep understanding of the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, persons, or contexts. Case studies are also meaningful if complex phenomena are the subject of investigation [34]. In the context of the present study, we were interested to understand how university coaches provided the four forms of social support strategies to their athletes, and the phenomena of how the athletes responded to the strategies. Hence, we found that a case study was an appropriate methodological choice for this study.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of eleven sport coaches (4 females, 7 males) from a local university in Singapore were approached to participate in the study. Eight coaches (4 females, 4 males) agreed to be involved in the study. The purposeful selection of the coaches was based on the recommendation by a Deputy Director (DD) and Assistant Director (AD) from the university's sports and recreation centre. The

inclusion criteria were: (1) coaches must be with current athletes for at least two seasons, and (2) they have achieved at least top three positions in the inter-varsity games. Four coaches coached teams (i.e. floorball, football, netball, and handball) and another four coached individual athletes (i.e. squash, table tennis, track and field, and bowling). Their age ranged from 28 to 70 years old ($M = 48.38$; $SD = 14.96$). They had an average of 18.63 years of coaching experience (ranging between 3 and 38 years). Their athletes aged between 19 and 29 years old ($M = 22.36$; $SD = 2.04$).

DATA COLLECTION

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the university's ethical review board. The participants were contacted by phone, eight agreed and gave consent to participate in the study. All participants were reminded that participation in this study was voluntary. They were entitled to confidentiality and could withdraw at any point of the study.

INTERVIEWS

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the eight participants. Each participant was interviewed once at a location convenient to him/her. They were guided through the same series of standardized open-ended questions, which were outlined in a semi-structured interview guide. A verbal introduction to the concept of perceived available support as defined by Freeman et al. [18] was given before the interview guide. The interview guide consisted of three sections. Introductory questions of the first section relating to social support (in general) were posed to the participants to help ease them into the session. The second section contained four major questions focusing on eliciting strategies and techniques associated with the four forms of perceived social support. Questions related to providing emotional support (e.g. *How do you show your athletes that you genuinely care for them and are concerned about their well-being? Give example.*), informational support (e.g. *What are some of the ways you go about providing advice to your athletes when they are performing poorly? Give examples*), tangible support (e.g. *How do you provide personal assistance to your athletes and to what extent? Give examples*), and esteem support (e.g. *What are some strategies that you adopt to instill your athletes with the confidence to deal with pressure,*

157 *especially at important competitions?)* were asked to gather data that were useful to answer the
158 research questions. The last section consisted of closing questions to understand how coaches push
159 their athletes to their potential while providing sufficient social support to them (e.g. *How do you*
160 *find that balance to push them hard enough to achieve sporting goals/targets while managing to*
161 *provide them sufficiently with social support?*). Probing technique was employed to get in-depth
162 information from the participants to shed light on the topic of investigation [35]. Each interview
163 lasted for about 50 minutes ($R= 48-62$) and was recorded using a digital voice recorder. Later, the
164 interviews were transcribed verbatim into 45 pages of A4 double-spaced text (Time New Roman,
165 12 points).

166 DATA ANALYSIS

167 The interview data were analysed by the third author using a combination of abductive (i.e.
168 themes derived from research questions – four forms of social support) and inductive (i.e.
169 subthemes created from participant responses) approaches to identify a collection of themes,
170 and level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. The steps included: (a) getting
171 familiarized with the data by reading the transcripts repeatedly, (b) generating comments and
172 descriptive codes for each transcript, (c) defining and naming codes, (d) identifying pattern
173 across all data to derive overarching themes, and (e) reviewing themes that are linked to the
174 social support theory throughout data-set [35-36]. In particular, we focused on the key
175 strategies employed by the coaches in making the four forms of social support available for
176 their athletes.

177 QUALITY ASSURANCE

178 Steps were taken to ensure rigour in the data analysis. Firstly, *member reflections* were adopted to
179 facilitate dialogue between the researcher and participants [37]. Main points of discussion were
180 first noted during the interviews, summarized and presented to participants after each session. This
181 allowed participants and the interviewer to reflect deeper and resolve any conflicts in interpretation
182 of what was discussed. Participants were also given opportunity to elaborate on what they have

shared according to the summary. Secondly, a summary of the coding structure with representative quotes was sent to the coaches one week after the interview to allow for verification, clarification and further contributions [33]. None of the participants requested clarification or amendments. In addition, the first and second authors, who were neither involved in the coding process nor familiar with the coaches, acted as *critical friends* [37] to challenge and encourage the third author to reflect upon his interpretation and decisions made during data analysis. They independently studied the coded data thoroughly, and provided critical feedback on the selection, labelling and organization of codes, subthemes and themes. This procedure challenges researchers to consider alternative interpretations and ideas, ensuring that codes and themes represent the data and coding is not ‘forced’ or biased. As a result, minor changes to the grouping of subthemes and rephrasing of labels was made to accurately reflect underlying codes.

RESULTS

This section outlined the four types of social support strategies implemented by coaches to better support their athletes. To distinguish individual participants and for confidentiality purposes, codes were used to identify the coaches interviewed (N=8 Coaches; T: Team 1-4, I: Individual 1-4).

Key strategies discussed by the coaches in their provision of social support are summarized in Table 1 with frequencies demonstrating how common or atypical the key strategies were employed among the participants. The specific strategies employed within each dimension are presented at the following section.

Insert Table 1 Here

STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

209 *GIVING SECURITY AND REASSURANCE*

210 All coaches recognized the importance of pushing their athletes' limits, they also acknowledged the
211 needs to give them the necessary support at the right time in order to achieve the goals. T4 said:

212 ...I wanted my athletes to be the best in Singapore... I gave them as much support as
213 possible at the correct time, reassured them what they were doing was going to bear fruits
214 later, and helped them see the meaning of doing so.

215 I3 believed the importance of building good relationship with his athletes both on- and outside-court
216 to better connect and support them. She saw the importance of "...establishing relationship and
217 providing continuous support to athletes from time to time via SMS, telling them not to worry and
218 giving encouraging words such as 'you are almost there, you'll be okay'."

219 *GIVING INDIVIDUALIZED ATTENTION*

220 Beyond getting to know the athletes at the personal level, all coaches expressed the view that it was
221 beneficial to provide the athletes individualized attention. This entailed familiarizing one's self
222 with the distinct character of each player, and responding in the appropriate way to the needs of
223 each of them, given the unique personalities and temperament. One of the coaches pointed out his
224 ability and having the advantage of "being able to read the facial expressions, body languages and
225 lack of enthusiasm to spot indicators of possible factors for an athlete's poor performance (T3)."

226 Coach I1 saw his role more of an athlete-coach, saying:

227 I tried to play the role as a friend to my athletes. I would attend to their needs such as
228 replying to their text regardless of what time they messaged him, giving my personal time
229 to them beyond the formal coaching sessions for the personal touch...

230 *SHOWING GENUINE CONCERN IN ATHLETE'S WELL-BEING*

231 A key approach to providing emotional support to athletes is by showing care and concern of
232 athlete's well-being, be sensitive to their feelings, so that they are willing to share their thoughts
233 with coaches. It is also easier to connect with the athletes later. I4 shared a personal experience:

Yesterday my girl lost a race, she was a champion but she lost because she was sick. How I helped her to regain her confidence, I told her, “Forget it, don’t worry about the loss. Go back first. I will meet up with you.” That is actually a bit abnormal of myself, as I’ll usually scold [him]. But for this particular case, I won’t scold. I’m usually very fierce and firm with my athletes, but if I reverse back the other way, I think the athlete will benefit a lot. Take for instance that you know me, every now and then I’m very fierce but suddenly when you reach the race, I show the concern to you, “Don’t worry about that”, I think it’ll play quite an important part, that is my personal feeling. (I4)

T3 shared a similar experience, highlighting the challenges his athletes faced after a defeat mentally and emotionally, and the importance of providing emotional support to them at this critical time:

I would give my athletes as much emotional support as possible and to do it at the correct time. This was because even when they came with the right mood after the defeat...on the way, they might have already been scolded by their parents for not performing well...All these things added pressure to the athletes and even when you tried to bring them up, they could not recover quickly. They were so upset...they just could not bring themselves up...so you need to be sensitive to them and be mindful of what you said.

GETTING TO KNOW ATHLETES ON A PERSONAL LEVEL

Five coaches expressed views that opportunities to know their athletes better should be done beyond training sessions (e.g. dinners, social gatherings) as illustrated by one coach (I2): “Once in a while, I would have dinner with them... and every New Year, most of them came to my house...so it was like a social gathering...from there I got to know more about them.” Some of the coaches also took every window of opportunity to have small chats with their athletes outside of trainings, or by coming to trainings early to connect with them better. Coach T1 gave an example to highlight this strategy he has adopted: “I usually made it a point to be early for trainings...that

259 was an opportunity, a window to get to know the athletes better, to know them more than just as a
260 person.”

261 *HELPING ATHLETES FEEL COMFORATABLE AND SECURED BY GETTING THEM TO PLAY*
262 *TO THEIR STRENGTHS*

263 Four coaches believed that by encouraging their athletes to play to their strengths, it would
264 naturally help them feel a certain level of comfort and security. T2 spoke about the importance of
265 being explicit with the athletes in pointing out their strengths. He said:

266 I got them to know their strength first so that they knew what they were good at and could
267 offer. I got them to think...these were the things I could provide to them to enhance their
268 performance, let them felt a sense of reassurance that they could reach their best potential as
269 athletes.

270 *MAINTAINING CONTINUOUS SUPPORT BY BEING THERE FOR ATHLETES*

271 The importance of prompt correspondence is shown here with the idea of being a ‘simple text
272 message away’. Simple gestures such as replying to text messages regardless of time, creating a
273 perception and assurance that the coach is ready to listen and be present, as shared by T2:

274 I would reply to their text regardless of what time they message me... Yeah, there were no
275 off-office hours so they knew I was always there for them...providing listening support as
276 well as being physically there for them when they needed support the most from me. This
277 was the most important for me.

278 Listening, providing advice, training together, nurturing confidence and trust are some of the
279 strategies for maintaining a coach’s presence in the athlete’s journey as noted by coach I3:

280 I am a very good listener; I would listen to their problems... Amanda Choo, she was a
281 record holder for 100m but she suffered 3 major injuries (muscle pull, plantar fasciitis and
282 blood disorder)... I would console her, provide advice and talk to her...I would listen and
283 provide support to her and everything she needed... it wasn’t as simple as just talking to her,

284 but to show through my actions that I would be with her...that I had confidence in her to
285 continue to train and excel.

286 STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING ESTEEM SUPPORT

287 *TEACHING ATHLETES TECHNIQUES TO DEAL WITH PRESSURE*

288 All coaches mentioned the use of distraction techniques in order to deal with pressures during a
289 game, by diverting their thoughts to other ways of looking at the game and not focusing on the
290 tough game situation:

291 When the athletes were pressured to release the shot or when they got into trouble, I would
292 always have them focus on other things... the idea was really to encourage my athletes to look
293 at things from a different dimension, and to help them focus on trying things that the
294 opposing athlete would not want them to do. (T1)

295 Another strategy employed by coaches was to prepare the athletes mentally before a
296 competition on a regular basis by calming them down through conversations. T2 provided a
297 specific example:

298 Prior to the competition, I helped to psyche them, talked to them, cool and calmed them
299 down...it might be a simple explanation but it was on a daily basis that I had to give them
300 this kind of support. For distraction, pattern interrupt, we knew that this guy after 3 strikes
301 would do a certain 'stupid' movement, so every time after 3 strikes we would interrupt the
302 play to get them mentally prepared.

303 *BUILDING A POSITIVE TEAM CULTURE BY KNOWING ATHLETES' INTERESTS AND WELL-* 304 *BEING*

305 Five coaches highlighted the importance of building a positive and healthy team culture by
306 knowing the athletes' interests. This helped in maintaining a healthy level of esteem among the
307 athletes. The strategies could range from probing the most ordinary interests of most young athletes
308 (e.g. pop culture, R&B, artists) to finding out more information on people they might be interested
309 in. These strategies proved effective for coach T2:

310 It was all part of building a positive team culture... I would learn the latest R&B songs and
311 sing with them, young people at your age are very into music (Laughs)... and I have to read
312 up, to know what Beyoncé did, who she married, and what's her baby's name and all.

313 *MANAGING ATHLETE'S EXPECTATION OF PERSONAL PERFORMANCE*

314 One of the strategies employed by coaches for providing esteem support for athletes was through
315 the management of self- expectations during games. This was to protect their esteem in the event
316 that certain overwhelming self-expectations were set and unfulfilled by the athletes. For example,
317 each time T3's athletes went for a competition, he would tell them that "they needed to go back and
318 review what they have done...win or lose, it doesn't matter." Similarly, I2 would "actually teach
319 her athletes how to put their problems aside, to focus on whatever task is at hand, especially at
320 competitions."

321 *PROVIDING POSITIVE REINFORCEMENTS TO ATHLETES*

322 One of the strategies employed by coaches in providing esteem support to their athletes is through
323 genuine commendation of those who deserved to receive praise and those who could potentially be
324 better in their game. T2 explained how important it was to praise the rookies. Strategies like this
325 may be deliberately used to motivate athletes and uplift their esteem:

326 One thing that I did was that I would always praise more than one person, the person who
327 was not the star player first, and then more modestly, the star player. It was important to use
328 the opportunity to lift those... maybe rookies and said that aloud to the whole team to hear, so
329 that the rookies would be proud of themselves.

330 Another coach (T1) adopted "focusing on the positives" strategy to better support his athletes. He
331 believed this strategy could:

332 Help athletes overcome a negative result even losing to a good team but performing very
333 well. The coach should help athletes feel good about this experience, because they actually
334 played to their best and in terms of performance, they were actually consistent.

335 *BUILDING ATHLETE'S CONFIDENCE THROUGH SELF-DISCOVERY OF TECHNIQUES*

Coaches explained how they stimulated self-discovery within their athletes to help them gain confidence in their gameplay by answering questions. This might come in the form of assessing the opponent's strengths and getting the athletes' to think how they could match this:

Tell me what your opponent strong at? She might be sticky right? How fast is she? Is she faster than you? How much faster? All these questions helped her analysed the situations and felt more confident about herself...then she told me, "Coach, I'm confident to take her, you don't worry." This strategy built her confidence and I just had to remind her occasionally like, "Don't go to that area, don't go to her right hand side, okay start off on her right hand side." (T3)

SETTING TIME FOR FESTIVE TEAM MEALS

Another significant strategy in terms of building a positive team culture is fostering camaraderie outside the game through sharing of meals together. This strategy provided occasion for the coach and athletes to collectively celebrate successes, as well as relished the process that went with overcoming challenges. Coach T2 specifically saw this as an opportunity to embark on a "debrief of the whole year," while coach I3 saw shared meals as a great way to "relish prizes after victory."

USING COACH'S PERSONAL LIFE EXPERIENCE TO MOTIVATE ATHLETES AND STRIVE FOR BETTER PERFORMANCE

It was interesting to note that two coaches made reference to their own personal athletic journey to motivate their athletes to overcome challenges and be inspired to come up with better performance. This particular strategy seemed appealing to athletes because they could relate with real life experiences:

I would use my life experience to motivate my athletes. The way I related to them was very blunt, for example, I told them that when I was a runner, I was very young, I was selected in 1966 to go for the Commonwealth Games, but prior to that, I just started working (in the prisons) and I was shot... by the gun in my leg... I was supposed to give up but I told myself that I won't give up. (I1)

STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING INFORMATIONAL SUPPORT

KEEPING COACHING POINTERS SPECIFIC TO PROVIDE CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Seven coaches discussed how important it was to provide specific coaching pointers to ensure that their feedback would be perceived as constructive. Coach I2 spoke about talking to the athlete and giving him/her a review of his/her performance, making sure that the conversation was always about the game:

I went in and gave them feedback; I talked to them and did a review... It was nothing personal; it was always about the game. I asked them don't they think they should do it like that? Why they should do this? Why they didn't do it even though they thought they should? Because it was all about the game, it was about how they performed during the game. They knew it was constructive and it was nothing personal.

Coaches also shared views on how crucial it was to use the right words when delivering the feedback. For instance, rather than saying "you kept dropping balls in the last 20 minutes," T2 proposed, "I want you to catch 5 out of 5 balls passed to you."

SUFFICIENTLY PREPPING ATHLETES IN COMPETITIVE SITUATIONS

One of the common strategies used by coaches was providing adequate information to the athletes before competitive situations. This strategy involved giving vital details about who they would play against; the kind of athletes they would be facing and the possible situations they would encounter. Providing the athletes with possible difficult game scenario helped reduce anxiety:

Normally before the game, we tried to understand who they might be playing, so you tried to give them a brief outline what kind of athletes they were going to face, and from there it prepared them to deal with certain situation at various points in time. (I2)

Coaches also expressed how important information helped their athletes to focus on things they could change rather than things they could not:

I had a player who even before going into the match was starting to shake in nervousness, so I told him to go in and do the luring first, or to watch a particular athlete to prep him

388 mentally. What were some of the possible situations and got him to relate the options...in this
389 way, it helped him to be more focused on the task instead of his own emotions. (T1)

390 *PROVIDING CONTEXTUAL FEEDBACK*

391 In order to support athletes who were not able to deliver their best performance, it seemed
392 important to understand their unique situations, so that a proper contextual understanding for the
393 reason athletes are underperforming could be brought to light. For instance, coach I3 cited the need
394 “to know the characteristics of athletes in order to grasp the reason behind performance. This was
395 crucial when the athletes did not understand why they lost.” In such situations, the coach could help
396 them by providing objective and useful inputs to them.

397 *TAILORING ADVICE TO ATHLETES WHEN THEY ARE PERFORMING POORLY*

398 Coaches expressed beliefs in adapting their coaching style and advice according to their athletes’
399 character, with one coach expressing that “some of the athletes were feisty liked fire (T4)”, while
400 some others were “sensitive souls (T2).” The approach to be used for dealing with an athlete would
401 vary depending on the situation and context:

402 I had some athletes who wanted me just tell or yell at them whenever they did something
403 wrong...And then there were some that are just sensitive souls, a bit only and they’ll just
404 cry. So it really depends on whom. What kind of reaction I’ll get, the approach will be
405 different. (T2)

406 *CONVEYING WHAT IS EXPECTED OF ATHLETES AND SETTING BOUNDARIES*

407 Coaches provided informational support to athletes by being clear about what they expected of
408 them. Athletes therefore became “aware of the level of performance their respective coaches would
409 like to see from them. It also helped if the coach knew what the athletes expected of him or her
410 (T4).” Thus, it was important to “clearly delineate the role between the coach and the athlete to set
411 reasonable expectations from one another (T2).”

412 *HELPING ATHLETES TO REFLECT ON THEIR PERFORMANCE*

Coaches also strongly believed in helping athletes reflect on why they didn't perform well, and dealing with the reasons specifically. The help and informational support provided in this case, would depend largely on the athlete's understanding of his/her situation, as well as the coach's objective assessment of the athlete's situation:

Firstly, we had to understand why they didn't perform well. There might be a few reasons: a lack of training, or mentally they are worried or afraid or stressed. You need to deal with them specifically. Find out their problems and concerns, got them to think and talked about it...if they had inadequate training, then we must have more trainings, or it could also be that the opponent was really too good, so we needed to find ways to counter them. (I4)

UNDERSTANDING ATHLETES' GOALS

Beyond conveying the coach's expectations of the athletes, another strategy employed by coaches in providing informational support to them is by understanding the athlete's goals. In this way, the coach would have better information and awareness of what the athlete wanted to achieve at a personal level, and be able to work with him or her based on those set goals:

Certain athletes you had to take a hard approach and be very straight to the point to them - meaning you must make it clear to them in terms of expectations and goals. I always ask my athletes what they want. To be the best athlete? To be a recreational athlete? Or just a school athlete? The expectations and commitments are very different... (I2)

GUIDING ATHLETES BY ENCOURAGING THEM TO EXPLORE DIFFERENT STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

Three coaches shared how they guided their athletes by helping them with game strategies. The specific strategies for this include "finding out who will be the opponent, how to receive his/her service, how to respond to the style of play, and providing impromptu techniques as the game unfolds (T3)." Another example of informational support were video clips shown to a right handed player so that he/she can see techniques appropriate for his/her condition:

I had a player who was right handed; she did stuff with her right hand and sidestep with her right leg... I had a video clip of the game to show her and reminded her when she goes inside, she should try scooping with her left hand and sidestep with her left leg. Within one match she scored in the opposite side three times and that convinced her that she should have looked at both options, and it was important that I made her feel that she discovered it herself and it wasn't through me nagging at her. So she took ownership in her self-discovery and is more driven, self-esteem and confidence build-up and all that.

STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING TANGIBLE SUPPORT

PROVIDING PRACTICAL HELP TO REDUCE ATHLETES' WORRIES AND STRESS

Seven coaches saw athletes' worries about practical matters to be an important concern, and provided help in various forms such as assisting in general transport arrangements, sourcing for financial deals, discounts and even free equipment, and providing subsidies for enrichment programmes. A lucid manifestation of practical help is by "understanding the financial situation of an athlete, giving consideration to the latter's lack of financial resources, and availing the needed training by providing free training to the athletes (T2)". In providing help to athletes at matches, I4 described:

I can help them in equipment choice, alteration of surfaces, because now you're allowed to sand the ball after a game... we'll let them know that we're well prepared, so don't worry about this, allowing them to feel more at ease.

They also iterated the importance of "planning a detailed training schedule during pre-season and be flexible with training sessions during exam periods, so as to help athletes better organize and manage their schedules (T3)." Coaches also cited help in fund-raising activities and in looking for sponsors to assist in fund-related matters. For example, coach T3 helped to "raise funds, look for money, and look for sponsors."

HELPING ATHLETES EXPLORE NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Coaches believed in helping their athletes to seek new opportunities through their personal network, providing assistance such as granting subsidies for enrichment programs, giving performance appraisals, recommending athletes to external sports clubs, and offering volunteer roles:

We could easily get people to have friendly matches; we could also help our athletes to source for overseas exchange programmes like in Malaysia, Hong Kong... We could help them to plan, because we knew the institutions there better. (T2)

USING COACH'S CONNECTIONS TO DEVELOP ATHLETES

In encouraging his athletes to broaden their experience, I2 encouraged his athletes to join the club and tapped personal connections in order to achieve certain ends (e.g. calling friends to ask for availability of internship posts or even permanent jobs). I3 expressed a similar view in seeking playing opportunities for athletes in external clubs:

For my university students, they might not be able to represent xx because for any competition you had to pick one or two to represent xx so I would tell them to join the club, to give them a chance to take part. So indirectly, I would help them to get into clubs, and to allow them to compete in other competitions.

PROVISION OF EQUIPMENT OR PURCHASE OF SPORTS NEEDS AT AFFORDABLE PRICES

Coaches provided practical support by guiding their athletes to “places where they could buy cheap and affordable sports equipment or apparel (i.e. ranging from shoes, bags to accessories) (I2)”.

Some coaches obtained institutional help in providing the practical support needed by athletes. For example, coach I4 sought the help of the university “to help support them by providing some track shoes.”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine university coaches' implementation strategies in providing emotional support, esteem support, informational support and tangible support to their athletes in the context of an Asian's university institution.

As for emotional support, providing comfort and security to athletes is important as this enhances feelings of being "loved or cared for", reinforcing self-confidence and feelings of adaptation [38]. Some of the ways through which the sport specific coaches such as strength and conditioning coaches (e.g., [39]), provided emotional support are by building a more personal relationship with their athletes. This allowed them to substantially reach into their insights and feelings as human beings beyond being athletes. This also included giving them individualized attention based on their specific needs, character and personalities. The "individualized attention" is made more effective by projecting an image of approachability and availability at a personal level, without compromising the well-delineated roles which they need to play vis-à-vis the athletes [18]. Coaches likewise expressed the need to manifest sensitivity and empathy in dealing with athletes who are experiencing difficult situations. This strategy is best employed by gaining insight into the athlete's situation and navigating around existing emotions by choosing the right words and moderating temperament so that these do not aggravate existing emotional stresses being experienced by the athletes [25]. Creating opportunities to know athletes personally such as team bonding activities were recognized by coaches as strategies to provide emotional support. These opportunities would contribute towards a stronger sense of belonging to the team/sport, providing a sense of comfort and security [11].

In order to ensure a healthy athletic esteem among their athletes, coaches of the present study strongly expressed the importance of building a positive team culture such as *providing equal treatment and attention* to all athletes, and adopting *athlete-specific motivation techniques* to raise athletes' self-esteem. Certain strategies such as levelling of expectations can serve to guide athletes in calibrating their performance and training, and help them recover from any failures in meeting such expectations. Encouraging the athletes to focus on performance rather than wins or defeats

allows them to recover from the esteem-crushing experience of defeats, and objectively evaluate their performance to focus on what should be done in the coming games. This strategy also helps athletes to avoid being complacent, and constantly prepare for the upcoming competitions [11]. Furthermore, the act of commending good performance across experienced and rookie athletes is a way of reinforcing the positive aspects of their experiences. Various strategies to provide esteem support through motivational support were mentioned by the coaches during interviews. These include the use of modeling by referring to the coach's personal life experiences to provide examples to athletes on how to overcome challenges and strive for better performance. The act of providing assistance and helping in managing pressures so that mental and physical stressors will not overwhelm athletes [18, 20] were also a key strategy in sustaining healthy esteem levels among athletes.

As for informational support, the coaches revealed various strategies for providing such support largely through the use of constructive and contextual feedback mechanisms, conversations with athletes, and tapping on the skills and expertise of coaches when imparting the necessary knowledge and advice to their athletes. Sport coaches were more dynamic in their support in helping athletes explore new skills. They mostly believed in providing sufficient planning, mental preparation, and focus to support their athletes' playing ability [11, 26]. On the other hand, coaches also provided guidance to their athletes by encouraging them to explore different playing techniques through self-discovery [40]. However, coaches' expertise served to inform the athletes of the bounded identities and roles which they need to fulfill vis-à-vis each other. Part of the informational support provided by the coaches is conveying to the athletes the delineated role expectations. This forms part of the process of role boundary-setting whereby the coach, by virtue of his expertise, has the rightful role of eliciting attention and compliance involving matters that affect the welfare of the athlete and the successful outcomes of the games [28].

As for tangible support, providing financial and practical help, securing opportunities for athletes, as well as using connections to help secure benefits and opportunities for them were the

most typical strategies they have employed. In an example given by one of the coaches, tangible help may be offered by granting free training sessions (where charges may apply), assisting in fund-raising endeavors, seeking sponsors to support their needs, and helping to secure equipment and supplies needed through seeking institutional help or finding cheap sources of the same. In terms of securing more opportunities for athletes, coaches revealed the importance of tapping on their personal or institutional networks as resource in order to facilitate new opportunities and experiences. All the strategies employed were believed to help athletes reduce stress conditions [29], and enhanced their well-being [28].

On the whole, our results echoed the findings of Annerstedt and Lindgren [41], in which caring was deemed to be fundamental for high performance coaching and achieving social sustainability; where caring encompasses respecting, valuing, involving, having dialogues with, listening and supporting athletes as human beings. Our results also partially overlap with the strategies that coaches have recently used when providing social support to elite female adult athletes [42]. We believe that cultural difference might affect the type of social support strategies employed by coaches. We agree with Taylor [43] who argued that the maintenance of harmony and the avoidance of making inappropriate demands on the social group by bringing personal problems to the attention of others in the East Asian cultural context is generally seen as a dignified goal. We also suspect that in the South-East Asian country like Singapore, cultural rules might have an impact on the ways social support is provided, not only on how it is used or perceived.

LIMITATIONS, STRENGTHS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There were several limitations to the present study that may influence interpretation of the results. First, the study was conducted with a small sample of participants in one Singaporean university, which is not an accurate representation of the entire population. Second, this study did not examine the social support perceived by athletes. Lastly, this study adopted a qualitative approach to explain how coaches implemented social support strategies in the coaching context.

Despite these limitations, the strengths of the study deserve to be acknowledged. First of all, the present study translated the wish of Sheridan et al. [27] and Nurullah [47] into practice by exploring the social support at the university sport level, and added to the existing knowledge of coaches' social support provision in Asian context. Secondly, our interviewees formed a highly experienced and well-balanced group of both female and male coaches who embodied both team and individual sports. Methodologically and ethically, our interviews took about one hour which is ideal and reasonable maximum length for a semi-structured interview to minimize tiredness for both the interviewer and the interviewees [36]. Finally, we adhered to good practice in conducting qualitative research in exercise and sport as suggested by Smith and McGannon [37]. Some of the steps taken included ensuring data analysis procedures, interpretation, and presentation of the results are rigorous so as to answer the research questions.

Research has shown that gender and type of sport or team might influence both the athletes' perceptions of coaches' social support to them [44], and coaching behaviours [45] that affect the type of social support strategies employed by coaches. Future studies should aim at having a larger sample size of university coaches and athletes from other countries to advance deeper knowledge about Asian contexts, and further advance knowledge on how different cultural contexts might affect or be compared to Asian contexts in relations to social support strategies. In addition, future research idea on how different gender respond to the four forms of social support strategies is also worth looking at in order to advance our knowledge in this line of research.

Given that some dimensions of perceived social support have actually been found to exacerbate rather than mitigate student-athletes' stress reactions [46], future research might want to examine both groups of participants simultaneously for a better, more versatile understanding of the topic under investigation. Future research might also want to adopt a mixed method by utilizing, for instance, the Perceived Available Support in Sport Questionnaire (PASS-Q) by Freeman, Coffee, and Rees [18], to comprehensively examine this topic to advance our knowledge.

591 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

592 It is important for coaches and sport practitioners to be mindful that university athletes need
593 support, when they need it most, and how to provide them with the appropriate support. They
594 should learn how to integrate the key social support strategies into their coaching approaches and
595 dealings with athletes. Moreover, while it can be argued that other stakeholders (e.g. officials,
596 parents, teammates, significant others) are also crucial sources of social support. Coaches are
597 instrumental in affecting the level of well-being and game satisfaction of athletes [48]. Universities
598 could consider the institutionalisation of various support mechanisms in order to help coaches'
599 better support their athletes. Such support mechanisms could include resources for coaches, which
600 they can use at their disposal each time they perceive the need to provide support to any of their
601 athletes. This is especially useful when they need to provide tangible and practical help to their
602 athletes. Beyond support mechanisms, a key practical implication of this study is that coaches may
603 need to enhance their coaching knowledge and social interaction skills so that they are able to
604 provide effective emotional and esteem support. We recognize that coaches may be fully equipped
605 with sport expertise, knowledge and social skills (informational resources), however, they may
606 benefit from a holistic process of capacity-building program that can equip them with the necessary
607 skills to provide emotional and esteem support to better support their athletes. In light of the
608 findings from the present study, intervention programs geared towards furthering the support
609 capacity of coaches should be a key consideration so as to ensure the well-being of both athletes
610 and coaches.

611

612 CONCLUSION

613 Various studies confirmed coaches are among the most critical sources of support for athletes,
614 considering the regularity and patterns of interaction, guidance and expertise they provide on an
615 almost daily basis to young athletes [5, 8, 31]. In the present study, this is especially true in a
616 university setting where trainings and competitions are structured, governed by concrete rules and

policies, and the dyadic relationship is bound to certain goals, targets and outcomes in a concrete way. Our results may help in creating an implementation framework of social support that emphasizes key strategies for coaches and practitioners to integrate in their approaches in sport coaching. Such a framework may take off from the salient key strategies employed by coaches in the context of a university.

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804 Table 1.

805 Summary of Key Strategies Adopted by University Coaches in the Provision of Social Support

Provision of Social Support	Strategies Employed	Frequency (N=8)
Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving security and reassurance • Giving individualized attention • Showing genuine concern in athletes' well-being • Getting to know athletes on a personal level • Helping athletes feel comfortable and secure by getting them to play to their strengths • Maintaining continuous support by being there for athletes 	8 8 7 5 4 4
Esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching athletes techniques to deal with pressure • Building a positive team culture by knowing athletes' interests and well-being • Managing athletes' expectation of personal performance • Providing positive reinforcements to athletes • Building athlete's confidence through self-discovery of techniques • Setting time for festive team meals • Using coach's personal life experience to motivate athletes and strive for better performance 	8 5 5 4 4 3 2
Informational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping coaching pointers specific to provide constructive feedback • Sufficiently prepping athletes in competitive situations • Providing contextual feedback • Tailoring advice to athletes when they are performing poorly • Conveying what is expected of athletes and setting boundaries • Helping athletes reflect on their performance • Understanding athletes' goals • Guiding athletes by encouraging them to explore different playing strategies and techniques 	7 6 4 4 4 4 3 3
Tangible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing practical help to reduce athletes' worries and stress • Helping athletes explore new opportunities • Using coach's connections to develop athletes • Provision of equipment or purchase of sports needs at affordable prices 	7 6 5 4

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