

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SPORTS CLUBS – IMPACT ON YOUNG ATHLETES’ PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. *The study examines the impact of interpersonal relationships within sports clubs in relation to the psychological development of young athletes, by analysing interactions within the “athlete–athlete” and “coach–athlete” relational systems. The sample comprised 182 athletes aged 12–18 years from 14 sports groups representing different levels of athletic performance. The methodology employed quantitative tools (the “Group Atmosphere” scale and the “Coach-Athlete” questionnaire) together with analysis of socio-psychological indicators. The results highlight the heterogeneous nature of interpersonal relationships: although an important proportion of athletes perceive cooperation and mutual support within the group, the presence of conflicts, lack of understanding, and low levels of satisfaction with sports activity are also evident. Coach–athlete relationships were associated with a major impact on the socio-psychological climate, being positively evaluated in the professional dimension but deficient in the emotional-affective component. The comparative analysis of groups with favourable and unfavourable climates indicates the decisive role of emotional support and effective communication in the development of a functional sports environment. The study highlights the need for a balanced approach in coaching practice, integrating performance objectives with the socio-emotional development of athletes, thus contributing to the creation of a positive psychological climate and the formation of a well-rounded personality.*

Keywords: *interpersonal relationships; coach-athlete relationship; psychosocial development; socio-psychological climate.*

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Introduction

Interpersonal relationships within sports clubs represent an important contextual factor associated with the psychosocial development and performance of young athletes, influencing both individual experience and collective outcomes. Psychosocial development in sport refers to the process through which young athletes acquire and consolidate fundamental competencies - emotional regulation, social skills, self-confidence, and resilience - through structured participation in sporting activities. This process is strongly mediated by the quality of the relational environment within the sports group, as interpersonal interactions determine the extent to which sport participation contributes to personal and psychosocial development (Bean et al., 2021). Research consistently indicates that sporting environments characterised by supportive relationships, clear communication, and emotional safety provide the necessary

conditions for achieving positive psychosocial outcomes among young athletes (Turnnidge & Côté, 2022).

Among all interpersonal relationships in sport, the coach-athlete relationship is widely recognised as the variable with the most significant impact on athletes' psychological well-being and performance. The 3+1C model, originally proposed by Jowett (2025) and subsequently elaborated in the scholarly literature, conceptualises this relationship through four fundamental dimensions: closeness (emotional affinity), commitment (mutual dedication), complementarity (behavioural co-operation), and co-orientation (convergence of perceptions), highlighting the role of collaboration and mutual understanding in building a functional and supportive relationship (Coussens et al., 2025). The motivational climate generated by the coach through this relationship plays a critical role in shaping athletes' goal orientations, intrinsic motivation, and perceived competence - factors that directly influence both sport engagement and performance outcomes (Appleton & Duda, 2016). Recent research confirms that perceived coach support mediates the relationship between relational climate quality and competitive performance, underscoring the need for coaches to prioritise relational quality alongside technical development (Cronin & Allen, 2018).

In contrast, relationships characterised by excessive control, lack of emotional support, or poor communication generate an unfavourable sociopsychological climate, with direct consequences for athletes' intrinsic motivation, engagement, and overall well-being. Psychosocial stressors - including relational conflict, inadequate feedback, and the perceived absence of support - represent significant barriers to optimal performance and long-term sport participation (Lochbaum et al., 2022; Bartholomew et al., 2010). Prolonged exposure to such relational conditions has been associated with psychological burnout among young athletes, manifested through emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Madigan et al., 2019). These findings highlight the critical role of the coach-athlete relationship not only in optimising performance, but also in safeguarding the psychological integrity of young athletes.

Beyond the relationship with the coach, peer interactions represent a complementary dimension of particular significance during adolescence. Adolescent athletes constitute a population especially sensitive to the quality of the relational environment, as this developmental stage intersects with essential processes of identity formation, peer socialisation, and consolidation of self-concept (Panza et al., 2020). The quality of relationships experienced within sports clubs during adolescence does not merely influence immediate performance outcomes; it also shapes the long-term trajectory of sport participation and personal development (Holt et al., 2024). Research within the Positive Youth Development (PYD) paradigm demonstrates that when interpersonal relationships in sport are characterised by trust, respect, and emotional responsiveness, they constitute powerful formative resources, facilitating the acquisition of life skills with applicability well beyond the sporting context (Camiré & Trudel, 2010). Conversely, negative relational experiences encountered during this sensitive developmental period can generate lasting psychological consequences, including diminished sport motivation, reduced self-esteem, and early withdrawal from athletic activity (Crane & Temple, 2021).

Understanding the mechanisms through which interpersonal relationships shape the psychosocial development and performance of young athletes thus represents a central concern

for coaches, sport psychologists, and researchers alike. Nevertheless, the scholarly literature indicates that the specific mechanisms linking the quality of interpersonal relationships to the psychosocial climate of sports groups remain insufficiently investigated, particularly within the context of youth competitive sport (Leşco et al., 2025). The present study aims to contribute to bridging this gap by examining interpersonal relationships within sports clubs through the lens of two fundamental relational systems – athlete-athlete and coach-athlete – and by examining the interpersonal factors associated with the psychosocial climate in youth sport groups.

Methodology

The present study was designed to examine the role of interpersonal relationships within sports clubs on the psychosocial development of young athletes, by analyzing interactions in the "athlete-athlete" and "coach-athlete" systems.

Participants

The sample consisted of 182 athletes aged 12-18 years from 14 sports teams, representing different levels of competitive achievement, including athletes who were candidates for and holders of the Master of Sport title. The groups were classified according to the perceived socio-psychological climate: 7 groups with an unfavourable climate, 5 groups with a favourable climate and 2 unclassified groups.

Instruments

The relationships between athletes were assessed using the “Group Atmosphere” scale (Hanin, 2000), which measures cooperation, emotional-affective contacts, involvement in sports activity and performance satisfaction. The tool has a bipolar structure, in which the items are defined by the opposition between two conceptual extremes, for example “approach – distancing” or “cooperation – lack of cooperation”. The interpretation of the scores was done as follows: the range 1-3 indicates an orientation towards the positive pole of the assessed dimension, the values 4-6 reflect an intermediate level, and the range 7-8 corresponds to the negative pole. The “coach-athlete” relationships were assessed using the “Coach-athlete” questionnaire (Table 1), which examines three dimensions: professional (functional and organizational interactions), personal (emotional-affective contacts), and behavioural (acceptance of the coach’s leadership style and requirements). The values were coded on a scale from 1 (negative evaluation) to 8 (positive evaluation).

Procedure

Data were collected individually and confidentially during training sessions. Quantitative analysis involved calculating the mean scores for each dimension and comparing groups with favourable and unfavourable climate. In addition, analyses between indicators of the coach-athlete relationship and the Group Atmosphere scale were conducted to examine associations between relational characteristics and the psychosocial climate. The results were synthesized

and presented in the form of diagrams and tables, supplemented with qualitative data obtained from the opinions of the athletes. This integrated methodological approach, combining quantitative and qualitative tools, offers a comprehensive perspective on the role of interpersonal relationships in the psychosocial development and performance of young athletes.

Results

In sports activities, interactions between group members occur continuously and are characterized by professional, emotional and interpersonal contacts. Communication represents a central mechanism through which relationships among participants are established, maintained, and developed over time. Relationships in sports groups can be analyzed at two main levels: relationships between athletes (the “athlete–athlete” system) and relationships between athletes and the coach (the “coach–athlete” system), both of which play an essential role in group dynamics and in the individual development of athletes.

Athlete-athlete relationships

To assess the relationships between athletes, the “Group Atmosphere” scale (Hanin, 2000) was used, which measures cooperation, the characteristics of working relationships, emotional-personal contacts, the degree of involvement in sports activity and the level of satisfaction with performance. Having a bipolar structure (“approach-distancing”, “cooperation-lack of cooperation”), the scale allows the predominant relational orientations to be identified, moderate values (4-6 points) being excluded from the analysis in order to highlight the prevailing trends.

The results ($n = 182$) indicate substantial variability and an ambivalent pattern in the relational climate of the sports groups. Thus, 47% of athletes reported cooperation and mutual support, whereas 19% reported a lack of such cooperation and support. Emotional-personal relationships were perceived as friendly by 36% of participants, while 29% reported hostility; 27% indicated mutual understanding, compared to 34% who reported its lack. The degree of involvement in the activity was relatively high (46%), but 28% of athletes indicate a low level of involvement.

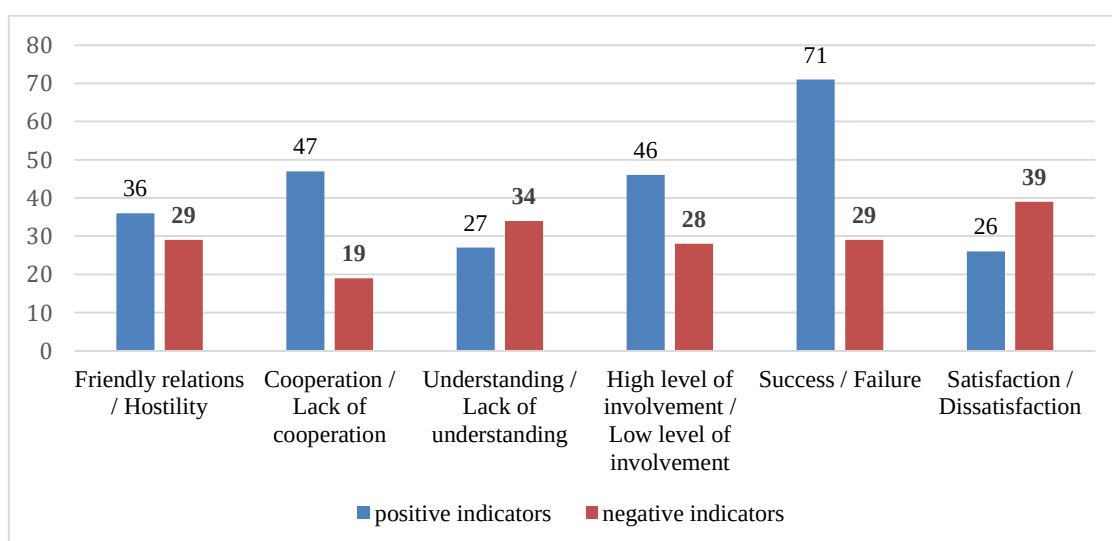


Figure 1. Analysis of the relational climate in sports groups based on the "Group Atmosphere" scale

A relevant aspect is the discrepancy between the perception of sporting success and general satisfaction: although 71% of athletes perceived their sporting activity as successful, only 26% reported satisfaction with their sporting experience, and 39% express dissatisfaction (Figure 1). These data suggest that athletes' dissatisfaction may not be explained exclusively by perceived performance or involvement in the activity and may also be associated with the quality of interpersonal relationships and emotional-personal contacts.

The comparative analysis of the 14 sports groups allowed the identification of groups with a favourable (5 groups) and unfavourable (7 groups) climate, while 2 groups did not fall into these categories. The mean scores of the "Group Atmosphere" scale were used as a synthesis indicator of the socio-psychological climate, highlighting significant variations between teams. The results indicate that relationships between athletes may range from functional patterns characterised by cooperation and mutual support to less functional patterns characterised by tension and conflict.

Coach-athlete relationships

The specialized literature and empirical data indicate the central role of the coach as an educational agent and a determining factor in configuring relationships within the group. Consequently, the study analyzed coach-athlete relationships, assessing professional, personal and behavioural dimensions.

The results highlight the significant influence of the coach on the behaviour and psychosocial development of athletes. Thus, 81% of respondents consider the coach's evaluation to be of major importance; 79% perceive "the coach's word as having normative authority", 74% appreciate that the coach knows their strengths and limitations, and 71% emphasize the need for increased attention from the coach. However, the data indicate an ambivalent character of the relationships, suggesting tensions or incongruities between the different dimensions of the interaction.

The evaluation on the three dimensions revealed the following aspects: the professional dimension reflects functional and organizational interactions; the personal dimension indicates the quality of emotional-affective contacts; the behavioural dimension highlights the perception and acceptance of the leadership style and the coach's requirements. The values were coded on a scale from 1 (negative evaluation) to 8 (positive evaluation), the comparative results being presented in Figure 2.

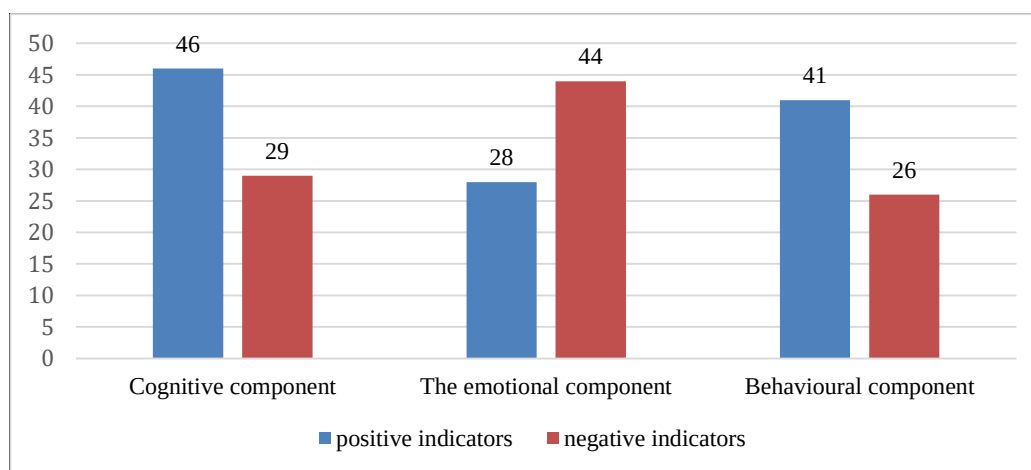


Figure 2. Results (percentages) of coach-athlete relationships on communication dimensions

These results highlight the fact that both interpersonal relationships between athletes and those between athletes and coach exert a direct influence on the socio-psychological climate of the group and on the psychosocial development of young athletes, confirming the importance of relational management in supporting athletes' long-term engagement and performance.

The detailed analysis of coach-athlete relationships highlights significant variations between the dimensions of interaction. Thus, 46% of athletes positively evaluate the coach's professional skills, indicating recognition of his ability to organize and lead the training process effectively. However, 29% express dissatisfaction with professional relationships, indicating the existence of difficulties in working interactions.

The emotional dimension, which reflects the quality of interpersonal contact and the emotional support provided by the coach, presents lower values: only 28% of the athletes registered positive evaluations, while 44% reported negative evaluations. These results indicate a significant deficit in the affective component of coach-athlete relationships, suggesting that emotional support and interpersonal connection are not uniformly perceived by athletes.

Regarding the behavioural component, 41% of the athletes accepted the coach's leadership style and behaviour, while 26% expressed rejection or opposition. This variation highlights the uneven nature of athletes' perceptions and the existence of tensions in the process of adapting to the coach's demands and managerial style.

To delve deeper into these discrepancies and identify the determinants of the ambivalent nature of coach-athlete relationships, a detailed analysis of the results obtained through the "Coach-athlete" questionnaire was conducted. This allowed highlighting the professional, emotional and behavioural dimensions that contribute most to the global perception of the relationship and its impact on the psychosocial development and performance of young athletes (Table 1).

Table 1. *Young athletes' perception of the relationship with the coach (n = 182)*

"Coach-athlete" questionnaire items	Yes (%)	No (%)
Manifest restraint in communicating personal thoughts and concerns to the coach	68	32
Emotional state is negatively influenced by the coach's mood	53	47
The coach exhibits a low level of tact in interpersonal relationships	55	45
Perceive the level of attention given by the coach as insufficient	52	48
The coach does not take individual characteristics into account in the training process	49	51
The coach does not intervene adequately in sanctioning the behavioural misconduct of his colleagues	43	57
The relationship with the coach has a predominantly formal and professional character.	67	33
Express the desire to identify with the model offered by the coach.	45	55

Note: The table presents the percentage distribution of responses from a sample of 182 young athletes to the items of the "Coach-athlete" questionnaire, assessing the perceived quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Values are expressed as percentages (%) for the Yes and No response options. The items were designed to evaluate the communicational, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions of the coach-athlete relationship within the context of youth performance sport training.

The analysis of the causes of athletes' dissatisfaction in communication with the coach highlights relevant aspects of professional-emotional interaction. The main problems identified include: lack of individual attention from the coach (52%) and failure to recognize the particularities of each athlete (49%). Regarding interpersonal communication, athletes reported

that the coach displays a low level of tact in relations with them (55%) and does not always take into account their emotional state (53%).

These results highlight the importance of emotional-personal contacts in the relationship between young athletes and their coach. The data also indicate that coaches tend to privilege formal-professional relationships, as reflected by the fact that 67% of athletes describe their interaction with their coach as strictly professional. However, the low level of emotional contact does not necessarily diminish the coach's authority: 45% of athletes express a desire to identify with the model offered by the coach, while 55% consider that the coach is not a reference point for them.

Thus, the findings indicate an ambivalent pattern in coach–athlete relationships. On a professional level, most athletes appreciate the coach's competence and organization; however, in terms of personal contacts and emotional support, negative evaluations were more frequent, determined by the coach's lack of attention, tact, and emotional openness.

Given that communication between the coach and athletes is a determining factor of the socio-emotional climate of the group, an analysis between the indicators of the “coach-athlete” system and those of the “Group Atmosphere” scale was carried out. For this purpose, three groups with an unfavourable socio-psychological climate (1–2–3) and three groups with a favourable socio-psychological climate (4–5–6) were selected, and the coach-athlete relationships within these groups were researched in detail. The results indicate an association between the quality of emotional and professional relationships and the psychosocial climate, differentiating groups with a favourable atmosphere from those with an unfavourable atmosphere (Figure 3 and 4, Table 2).

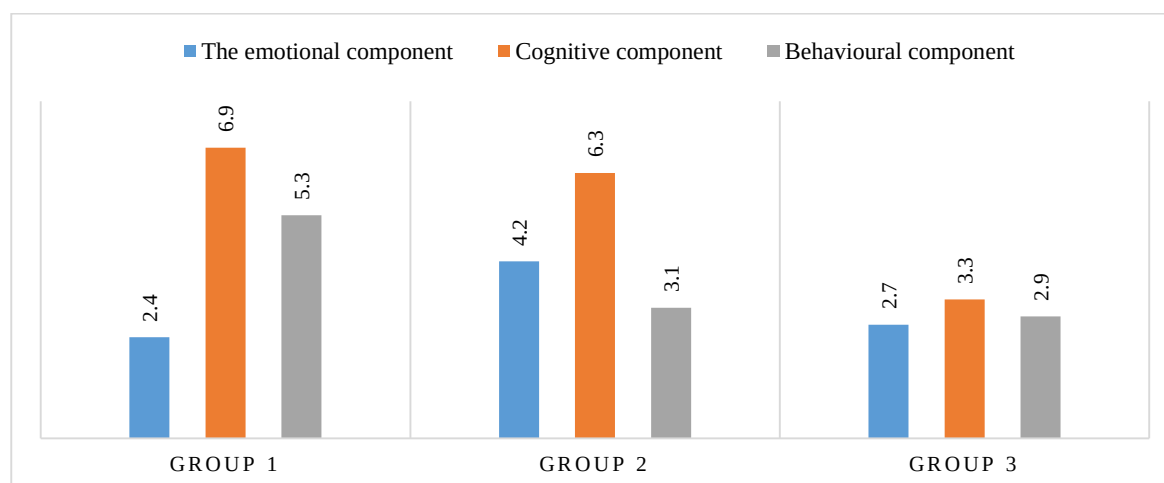


Figure 3. "Coach-athlete" relationships in groups with unfavourable socio-psychological climate

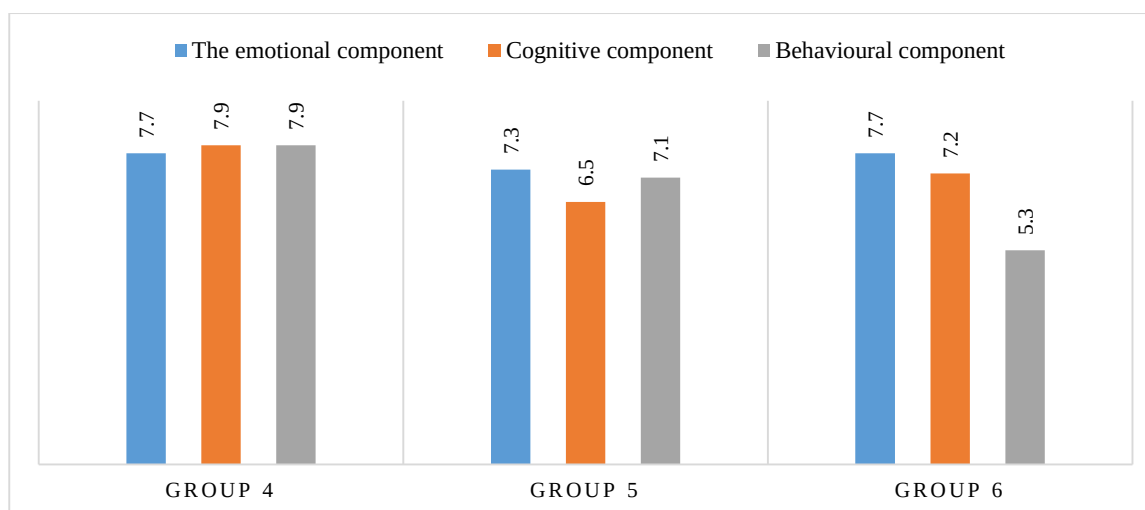


Figure 4. "Coach-athlete" relationships in groups with a favourable socio-psychological climate

The analysis of Figures 3 and 4 highlights important differences between groups with a favourable socio-psychological climate and those with an unfavourable climate. In groups 4, 5 and 6, characterized by a favourable climate, the relationships within the "coach-athlete" system are distinguished by high values for all components of the evaluation - professional, emotional and behavioural. In contrast, in groups 1, 2 and 3, with an unfavourable socio-psychological climate, the emotional component registers low values, while the professional and behavioural components can vary between low, medium or high values. These results suggest that, in teams with an unfavourable climate, the emotional interactions between the coach and the athlete are inadequate and insufficient for creating a positive atmosphere (Table 2).

Table 2. Differences between groups according to socio-psychological climate

Indicators	Groups	X ± m	t	p
The emotional component	Favourable socio-psychological climate (n= 45)	7.4 ± 0.9	17.89	.001
	Unfavourable socio-psychological climate (n= 45)	3.2 ± 1.3		
Cognitive component	Favourable socio-psychological climate (n= 45)	7.2 ± 0.9	6.18	.001
	Unfavourable socio-psychological climate (n= 45)	5.4 ± 1.7		
Behavioural component	Favourable socio-psychological climate (n= 45)	6.8 ± 1.2	8.74	.001
	Unfavourable socio-psychological climate (n= 45)	3.9 ± 1.8		

Note: The table presents between-group comparisons according to socio-psychological climate across three evaluated components: emotional, cognitive, and behavioural. Values are reported as mean and standard error ($\bar{X} \pm m$). Group differences were examined using the independent samples Student's t-test (n = 45 per group). Statistical significance was established at $p = .001$, indicating highly significant differences between the favourable and unfavourable socio-psychological climate groups across all analysed components.

In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative discussions with athletes provided detailed information on the specifics of relationships with coaches. The opinions expressed reflect both positive relationships and conflicts encountered in the process of training and interpersonal communication. Athletes emphasized the importance of emotional support, individual attention and social activities carried out together with the coach. At the same time, some opinions indicated difficulties in interpersonal communication, excessive criticism and pressure exerted by coaches (Table 3).

Table 3. *Young athletes' perception of emotional and conflicting relationships with coaches*

Sports / Group	Age / Title	Relationship type	Examples of opinions
Athlete 1	12 years old, candidate for master of sports	positive	"We understand each other, and sports results do not influence the relationship with the coach."
Athlete 2	14 years old, candidate for master of sports	positive	"Training is combined with social activities: we celebrate birthdays, go to the cinema and walk in the park."
Athlete 3	15 years old, candidate for master of sports	positive	"The coach constantly supports us and helps us overcome difficult moments."
Athlete 4	16 years old, master of sports	positive	"We respect the coach; thanks to him I achieved success and matured."
Athlete 5	youth team (boxing)	negative	"Conflicts with the coach prevent me from training at my full capacity."
Athlete 6	candidate for master of sports	negative	"The quality of training depends on the mood of the coach; criticism is constant if he is not in good mood."
Athlete 7	youth team	negative	"It's difficult to meet his expectations; he's constantly dissatisfied."
Athlete 8	candidate for master of sports	negative	"The coach is trying to punish me; I don't trust him."
Athlete 9	candidate for master of sports (wrestling)	negative	"All the coaches are very strict and tough."
Athlete 10	7th grade, candidate for master of sports	negative	"The first coach was very good; the current coach is acting distant."
Athlete 11	9th grade, master of sports	negative	"For coaches, we are not people, but performers who must follow the program without comment."
Athlete 12	8th grade, judo, master candidate	negative	"The coach is not an authority; I can't tell him my problems."

Note. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured discussions, complementing the quantitative analysis. Relationship type (positive/negative) was determined via content analysis of expressed opinions, based on the dominant affective valence identified. The opinions reflect the impact of coach–athlete relationship quality on group psychological climate and training process effectiveness.

These findings support the importance of emotional and relational dimensions in coach–athlete interactions and suggest that positive relationships are associated with a more favourable psychological climate, while conflicting or deficient relationships can generate dissatisfaction, tensions and difficulties in the training process. Thus, the quality of interpersonal relationships not only influences the well-being of athletes, but also determines the efficiency of the sports team's functioning and the development of individual skills.

It can be concluded that when the coach goes beyond the framework of strictly formal relations and directs his activity not only towards the functional, technical and tactical training of athletes, but also towards creating a favourable psychological climate, young athletes perceive the personal qualities of the coach more positively, and his authority is significantly strengthened. The qualitative data obtained through discussions with athletes complemented the quantitative information, providing details on the peculiarities of their relationships with coaches.

Interpersonal communication becomes personal when the coach adopts an individualized approach, oriented towards the needs and peculiarities of each athlete. In the absence of this approach, the coach-disciple relationship remains at a strictly formal level. Such a professional-formal orientation can be explained by an exclusive focus on training for high performance, neglecting the emotional and relational dimensions of the interaction.

Under these conditions, the development of appropriate interpersonal relationships and the creation of a favourable socio-psychological climate go beyond the strictly professional interest of coaches focused only on performance, which explains the emergence of the negative aspects identified previously: low level of emotional-personal contact and unsatisfactory psychological climate within the group.

The research results highlight the existence of differences in the professional orientations of coaches. Thus, there are coaches who adopt more a predominantly formal or task-oriented approach to their students and coaches who prioritize the development of the young athlete's personality. These differences may reflect variation in coaches' professional orientations and interpersonal strategies, directly influencing the quality of interpersonal relationships and the socio-psychological climate of the sports group.

Discussions and conclusion

The findings support the importance of interpersonal relationships in the psychosocial development of young athletes, highlighting the direct influence of the “athlete–athlete” and “coach–athlete” relational systems on the socio-psychological climate of the group. These findings are consistent with research in sport psychology, which emphasizes the importance of the quality of relationships in optimizing the sports experience (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

Regarding relationships between athletes, the data indicate an ambivalent character, marked by the coexistence of cooperation and involvement with tensions and dissatisfaction. The discrepancy between the perception of sporting success and the low level of satisfaction suggests that perceived sporting success alone may not adequately reflect athletes' well-being, which is strongly influenced by social support and the quality of interactions. These findings are consistent with Davis et al. (2021) and can be interpreted in relation to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), according to which the satisfaction of fundamental psychological needs - competence, autonomy and relatedness - is essential for the motivation and well-being of athletes.

The analysis of coach–athlete relationships highlights a relatively positive assessment of the coaches' professional skills, but a significant deficit in the emotional and interpersonal dimensions. This uneven distribution can be interpreted through the lens of the 3+1C model (Jowett, 2025), but also of the motivational model proposed by Mageau and Vallerand (2003), which highlights the role of the coach's interpersonal style in supporting autonomy and intrinsic motivation. The high level of formalisation of the relationship and the communication difficulties reported by the athletes are consistent with observations reported by Simons and Bird (2023), according to which controlling leadership styles can diminish involvement and satisfaction.

The differences between groups with a favourable socio-psychological climate and those with an unfavourable climate highlight the prominent role of the emotional-affective component. In functional groups, relationships are balanced on all dimensions, while in unfavourable ones, the deficit of emotional interaction affects group cohesion and efficiency. These results indicate that higher-quality relationships are associated with a more positive psychosocial climate and to supporting sustainable performance (Leşco et al., 2025).

Thus, the study highlights the need for a balanced approach in the work of coaches, which integrates both performance objectives and the psychosocial dimension of athletes' training. The development of relational skills, empathy, and effective communication may contribute to a more positive group climate and higher levels of athlete satisfaction and involvement.

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The use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in scientific writing: During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors employed ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4) to improve grammatical accuracy and the clarity of expression. Following the use of this tool, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the published article.

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