


Masters Swimmers' Experiences With Coaches: What They Want, What They Need, What They Get

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Abstract

Much work addresses coaches' contributions to younger athletes; however, the psycho-social coaching needs of adult Masters athletes remain unexamined. This study explored the lived experiences of 10 Masters swimmers (5 male, 5 female; age range = 45–65 years) through interviews. Interpretative phenomenological analysis delved into benefits that swimmers wanted to derive from coaches, how they wished to be coached, and what they liked about coaches. Themes related to (a) swimming and non-swimming benefits; (b) coaches' experience and professional development, personal attributes, and behaviors holding athletes accountable to training; (c) preferences for coaching instruction; (d) preferences for coaches' planning/structuring of the practice and program; and (e) preferences for how coaches prepare and interact with them at competitions. We discuss how benefits relate to models of athlete development and identify how preferences link to adult learning literature and models of coaching practice. Finally, we note incongruent findings and limitations to be addressed in future.

Keywords

older adult athletes, coach, swimming, preferences, competition

Adults represent one of the fastest growing sport cohorts in many Westernized countries (Weir, Baker, & Horton, 2010). Adult sportspersons are referred to as Masters athletes, particularly when they are above 35 years of age and registered for sport, and when they acknowledge they “prepare in order to participate” (Young, 2011). Masters athletes are often characterized by sport activity that includes formal registration to a sport club with a dedicated coach.

Coaches structure participants' training and establish the tone of the sport environment (e.g., Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2013). Furthermore, coaches can make sport more enjoyable for athletes, with athlete satisfaction being greatest when coaches' actions are congruent with athletes' preferences (e.g., Chelladurai & Reimer, 1998). However, coaches' impact on adults' experiences in sport is unclear, and there is very little empirical evidence describing their unique psycho-social coaching needs (Young, Callary, & Niedre, 2014). At present, a paucity of research exists regarding how adult athletes perceive their interactions with coaches, whether they value coaches, and what they want from coaches.

The potential importance of Masters coaches can be gleaned from various sources. First, more than 70% of serious-minded Masters swimmers (MSs) report having a personal coach (Young, 2011). Second, Masters athletes report strategically using coaches to motivate themselves (Medic, 2009). Third, coached Masters athletes report more self-determined

profiles beneficial to one's overall psychological well-being and persistence than athletes without a coach (Medic, Young, Starkes, & Weir, 2012). Coaches appear to be an instrumental resource for Masters athletes, yet we know little about how Masters athletes perceive their experiences with coaches, and what their preferences are during these experiences.

Recently, the important roles of Masters-level coaches have been intuitively speculated on, and research has begun to elucidate background themes/variables that might influence coaching practice with Masters athletes. For example, Young et al. (2014) proposed that coaches facilitate adult athletes' involvement directly by using effective techniques at the sport venue, and indirectly by strategically structuring sport activities to help circumvent participatory barriers related to motivation and time. Rathwell, Callary, and Young (2015) described three prominent profiles of coached MSs: (a) social swimmers, (b) swimmers who strive for improvement, and (c) swimmers who enjoy taking control of their

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swimming and swim clubs. Each profile was affiliated with different themes relating to swimmers' motives, experiences specific to Masters swimming, perspectives on competition, and perspectives on being coached. Investigators contended that these themes are important within coached competitive Masters sport environments because they contextualize the environment within which coaches of Masters athletes work. Still, there remains a need to explore experiences that MSs have had with their coaches to better understand what they want from their interactions with coaches.

The need to understand Masters athletes' interests is evidenced by a gap in knowledge relating to the structure of coaching education programs. In Canada, for instance, programs spell out age-specific needs distinguishing between children, adolescents, and athletes in early adulthood, but no coach education work discriminating athletes' needs exists for older sporting adults. The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC; 2013) has produced a resource booklet pertaining to biophysical considerations of coaching Masters athletes; however, psycho-social aspects of coaching this age cohort are less developed. For example, the following lines are included in the CAC booklet for Masters coaches: "What's different about coaching Masters athletes? And the answer is, probably not much." Then, "As long as they're healthy, there's no real difference between coaching them and coaching younger athletes" (CAC, 2013, p. 9). These statements reflect an implicit assumption of no age differences in coaching approaches toward Masters athletes compared with younger athletes. In general, athlete development models, such as the internationally recognized Long Term Athlete Development Model (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2013), or empirically based models of talent development (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002) also do not elaborate on how coaches might work specifically with adult athletes. Currently, competitive, but non-elite, adult athlete coaching requirements are simply conceptualized as the same as age group athletes. This needs to be addressed by research that asks Masters athletes to explicitly describe nuanced aspects of their experiences with coaches.

Coaches learn largely from experience in coaching practice (Mallett, Trudel, Lyle, & Rynne, 2009), and so understanding athletes' experiences and preferences with coaches is an important first step in considering what coaches can do (or should refrain from doing) to accommodate the needs of Masters athletes. Indeed, aspects pertaining to the art of coaching, such as how one empowers or motivates, how one engages in exchanges with athletes, and styles of instruction and feedback delivery may be unique when coaching Masters athletes. Pedagogical models of coaching (e.g., Chelladurai, 2007; Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995) and adult learning (e.g., Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006) indicate that learning variables should be understood with a particular eye to individual characteristics of the person/social situation of

the cohort in question, which suggests that themes prevailing in younger sport cohorts (e.g., youth, adolescent, collegiate/young adult) may not be assumed in Masters athletes. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of MSs with coaches, in terms of understanding what they uniquely want from their coaches. In doing so, we explored benefits MSs wanted to derive from their coaches, how they wished to be coached, and what they liked about their coaches.

Method

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was deemed the best fit for this research as it is a rigorous approach to understand participants' lived experiences to describe what a topic is like for them and interpret how they make meaning within a specific context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2008). IPA develops an interpretative analysis based on descriptions of lived experiences in relation to social, cultural, and theoretical contexts. Thus, through MSs' stories, we can interpret what they want from a coach. IPA involves a labor-intensive and detailed analysis of verbatim accounts of a small number of participants, usually through semi-structured interviews (Larkin et al., 2008; J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013).

Participants

Given that MSs have multiple motives for sport participation and diverse competitive orientations (Masters Swimming Canada, 2012a), we chose to interview five male and five female MSs engaged in varying competitive levels. We recruited 10 swimmers via theoretical sampling from eight swim clubs in the province of Ontario, Canada. Swimmers were screened using a one-page survey to ensure they were between 45 and 65 years old. This age range captures participants leading into, at, and aging beyond the cohort of maximal Masters swimming participation, which is 50 to 55 years old based on competitive registration figures (e.g., Masters Swimming Canada, 2012b). The screening page was also used to ensure participants were formally registered in competitive events and in coached swim clubs, with coaches with whom they regularly trained. On average, swimmers trained 3 hr weekly with their coach. Finally, the screening page ensured that all participants believed that their training was moderately to highly important in preparing them for upcoming competitive events. All swimmers engaged in competition, varying from regional to international competitions. On average, participants swam for 29 years over their life span (ranging from 8 to 50) and competed at a Masters level for 13.5 years (ranging from 1 to 37). The athletes did not individually hire personal coaches, but joined local clubs, meaning they trained with the coach who worked at that club. The variety of participants' experiences is a strength of this study, as the collation of results from these participants mimics what coaches see when working with MSs in a club.

We provide a brief synopsis of the researchers' backgrounds to orient the reader to the basis of our interpretations. All members of the research team engaged in a bracketing exercise to reflect on biases/experiences in coaching and Masters sport before creating the interview guide (Larkin et al., 2008). The first author coached at various levels from youth to high performance, and recently began coaching Masters athletes. She believed coaches are important in helping individuals learn how to improve their sport skills, but they can also support athletes emotionally, cognitively, physically, and even spiritually. She believed coaches are key to improvement and that this requires an educated coach. The second author had mixed feelings about coaches. His own athletic experience shaped his view of coaches to see them primarily as facilitators of performance. Through his research, he was exposed to the idea that coaches' primary role was to facilitate commitment and lifelong engagement in sport. The third author's experiences as a high-performance coach for college-aged athletics helped form his bias that coaches are important and critical, but that their roles are often over-estimated. He viewed the role of the coach in Masters-level sport as positive, negligible, or benign, before considering it negatively. He believed that adults are more developed in their sense of self, so that negative pressures from coaches are less a threat to their sense of self-esteem.

Data Collection

The research team collaborated to create an interview guide in which questions were open-ended and semi-structured to allow the interviewer to guide the discussion while giving the interviewee the chance to discuss openly without restrictions, granting the interviewee the decision to talk about what he or she deemed to be most important (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). After a pilot interview in which the two senior researchers observed and provided feedback to the second author about his interviewing techniques and discussed the relevancy of the interview questions according to the answers that were provided, the second author proceeded to conduct the 10 interviews. The second author has taken courses in qualitative research methodologies and has substantial previous experience interviewing participants in other research studies.

Interview guide. Initial questions asked for information about athletes, their perspectives on Masters sport participation, and reasons for swimming and having a coach. Next, he asked athletes about specific needs and wants from their coach. Questions included, "Do you like having a coach? Why or why not?" and as follow-up queries included, "How important is your coach to you as an adult athlete?" "What do you perceive to be the value of having a coach? Please provide an example. Examples can relate to your present coach, or coaches of adult sport in the past." He constantly probed

athletes to talk about personal experiences that illustrated their particular preferences for coaching. He also asked them about experiences with favorite and least favorite Masters coaches, for example, "Can you describe your specific situations with your favorite coach, starting with your experiences training and preparing for competition and ending with your experiences during the competition." Each interview lasted approximately 60 min.

Data Analysis

We transcribed the interviews verbatim and imported them into QSR NVivo10 computer software program (NVivo, 2010). All participants were assigned a pseudonym. In line with J. A. Smith and colleagues' (2013) recommendations, we followed several steps for IPA, which will be subsequently detailed: (a) a line-by-line analysis; (b) identifying themes (convergence and divergence); (c) dialogue between researchers pertaining to coded data and knowledge about meaning of the codes, to develop a more interpretative account; (d) development of a frame that delineates connections between themes; (e) the organization of analyzed data; (f) collaborative audits to develop coherence in analysis; and (g) researchers' reflection on perceptions and process.

We analyzed each interview separately to find emerging themes before examining across interviews (J. A. Smith, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2013). Following J. A. Smith and Osborn's (2003) recommendations, each team member read each transcript. In this way, we could understand the personal experiences of each participant and generic themes in the analysis across transcripts. For Participants 1 and 2, all three researchers did a line-by-line analysis and identified and coded themes from participants' experiences with coaches. We then compared codes and came to consensus on the coding of each transcript by creating a chart of themes for each participant. After establishing an understanding of the method of analysis, we repeated the same steps for Participants 3 through 10, except only one member of the research team who performed a line-by-line analysis on the transcripts. The other two researchers acted as "critical friends" (B. Smith & Caddick, 2012) and reviewed the codes and corresponding quotes while checking for discrepancies. These codes were based on three types of analyses (J. A. Smith et al., 2013): (a) descriptive key words, phrases, and explanations that the participants used; (b) the manner by which participants described their experiences (i.e., their use of the word "I" versus "they," pauses, laughter); and finally (c) conceptual comments made by the researchers in which we noted the interpreted meaning of experiences they described. For each transcript, discussion ensued until we had 100% consensus on the codes. Ten separate charts of themes were produced to provide a frame for the comprehensive exploratory comments and notes from the codes that were recorded of the interpretations of the transcripts (J. A. Smith et al., 2013).

Table 1. Number of Quotes per Theme, Sub-Theme, and Participant.

Theme	Benefits of having a coach (92)		Characteristics of the coach (205)			Instruction (163)		Planning structural elements (136)		Competition (90)		Total
	Swimming (49)	Non-swimming (43)	Experience (95)	Attributes (63)	Behaviors (47)	Feedback (84)	Strategies (79)	Practice (113)	Program (23)	Prep for comp (71)	During comp (19)	
Sub-theme												
Name												
Whitney	2	0	6	12	11	5	6	12	2	9	3	68
Beth	12	2	14	14	3	2	5	21	0	4	0	77
Martin	7	3	6	0	0	18	4	16	1	3	3	61
Jordan	6	1	7	5	7	16	10	12	0	3	1	68
Darren	3	2	12	14	12	2	15	9	2	10	2	83
Catherine	2	22	3	2	0	8	7	2	4	3	2	55
Max	2	1	25	8	2	14	18	16	9	13	1	109
Lorna	2	5	6	3	3	6	5	4	1	11	5	51
Justin	2	5	6	1	3	5	2	8	2	5	2	41
Kelly	11	2	10	4	6	8	7	13	2	10	0	73
												686

Note. All numbers represent the number of quotes in each theme/sub-theme.

According to J. A. Smith and Osborn (2003), once each participants' transcripts have been analyzed, then investigators can analyze across transcripts. We compared the charts of themes across each participant and merged themes according to convergences and divergences to follow data from initial comments on transcripts to the final structure of merged charts. Through collaborative auditing of the themes (J. A. Smith et al., 2013), we developed five main themes. Four themes pertained to what MSs wanted of their coaches and one theme pertained to MSs' perceptions of their preferred benefits from having a coach. Each theme had 2 or 3 sub-themes for a total of 11 sub-themes. Finally, we engaged in reflection to assess our perceptions of the data and the process of data analysis.

As researchers, we have backgrounds in qualitative research that is less interpretative in nature than IPA, and this was our first foray into IPA. J. A. Smith and colleagues (2013) noted that novice IPA researchers tend to be "too cautious, producing analyses that are too descriptive" (p. 103), and we offer that this was possibly a limitation. Thus, we decided to use a "realist tale" to present the data, providing only one interpretation based heavily on our understanding of the way the participants spoke of their existing social world (Sparkes, 1992). Sparkes (1992) and Sparkes and Smith (2014) noted realist tales are evident in interpretive research and are the most common way of disseminating qualitative findings in sport research. Although realist tales can be limited interpretations, Van Maanen (1988) noted they are still valuable in providing seminal interpretations of how individuals experience phenomena. Thus, we provide detailed data about what MSs want and need from coaches, information that had yet to be uncovered in previous research and is thus rich and valuable in its own right.

Results

We provide quotes supporting MSs' beliefs in the benefits they derive from having coaches. We then provide quotes to illustrate four themes relating to how MSs wished to be coached, and what they liked about their coaches. As recommended by J. A. Smith (2011), we provide the prevalence for each theme according to the number of participants whose quotes fell into the themes, and we provide the number of quotes corresponding to each theme. With a sample size of 10 participants, it is recommended to give quotes from 3 to 4 participants per theme (J. A. Smith, 2011). Furthermore, with this sample size, we sought to emphasize recurrent themes for the whole group (J. A. Smith et al., 2013). Although there exist no rules to define a recurrent theme (J. A. Smith et al., 2013), our themes were deemed recurrent when they were identified and commented on in the lived experiences of 8 to 10 participants. The breakdown of the prevalence of these themes and sub-themes is shown in Table 1.

Benefits of Having a Coach

All 10 MSs (total of 92 quotes) spoke about experiences regarding their preference for swimming specific outcomes, as well as non-swimming outcomes related to having a coach.

Swimming specific outcomes. Listening to MSs' stories about their coaches, we interpreted that coaches influenced MSs' self-efficacy, performance, and interest in swimming. Catherine said,

It's the feeling that I have somebody rooting for me. The support, to me, is critical. He believes that I can do it and makes me believe that I can do it. He is just very honest. When the coach says so, it's real. So it's worth it to pay money for that. I truly enjoy it.

The coach influenced Catherine's level of self-efficacy, as she felt more confident in her swimming abilities on account of having a coach. The MSs were satisfied that coaches had a positive influence on their skill and performance. Beth noted,

The coach really improved my strokes. I couldn't do the butterfly before and now I have a very good butterfly. I wouldn't say it's super-fast but I'm faster than most people. I swam a lot when I was a kid but I could never learn the butterfly . . . because the coach swims it and because of his interest and, because of his coaching, I feel like I learned that.

In addition, coaches appeared to influence swimmers' interest in the sport as individuals and in terms of group involvement. Max said,

Swimming is a lot more fun (with a coach) . . . Without a coach I'd just be doing lines myself, which is easy, but boring. It would probably be a good thing for me fitness-wise, but it doesn't keep me mentally stimulated. Having the coach mix it up—that's what keeps it fun for me.

Martin explained how it affected the group:

Until we had the coach that we have right now, we would have a reasonable amount of turnover every year. And since we've had the coach that we have right now, our retention rate has been extremely high. And I would attribute that directly to the coaching.

Non-swimming outcomes. MSs talked about experiences with coaches that influenced their overall health through information on cross-training and nutrition, their interest and participation in other sports, and their personal development; however, we determined coaches' influence on these areas was mostly indirect. For example, in answer to the question, "Has having a coach influenced your life outside of sport?" Kelly answered,

I don't think so. Well, I suppose indirectly. I'm a happier person because I swim. I'm healthier, and that has a positive impact on me, so that would affect me outside of actually being in the pool. But is he a motivational speaker that changed my life? No.

Other swimmers explained less, as outlined by Darren below:

Interviewer: Has having a coach influenced your life outside of sport?

Darren: I don't think so.

Interviewer: Do you believe that that's a role of a coach in Masters sport?

Darren: I don't . . . I've never thought of it like that. I don't think so.

Justin summed it up as follows:

Having a coach is important within the context of my swim activity. It doesn't carry much farther than that. I know some people are using this coach as their overall wellness coach. That would be a lot more face time and interactions (with the coach) in terms of other decisions. Swimming is a compartment in my life, and within the compartment of swimming, I appreciate him.

Justin's quote is in contrast to Catherine's view below:

Well I've been swimming 4 days a week. And I'm not only swimming, I've been walking 18 K a week, I've been doing yoga 3 times a week, and paddle-board too . . . Those were the coach's suggestions. He got us the half price paddle-board course. I loved it. So I've been doing paddle-board since then. I wasn't always interested in yoga, but now I'm even doing yoga on the paddle board. The coach has somehow helped me discover those parts of me that I didn't know that I would enjoy so much . . . He also gave an information session on nutrition and suggested a few things for me to eat. So, my shape has changed because of that and I feel so good about myself . . . I think in general it's helping me cope with work, with stress . . . I can't imagine not having a coach now. My priority used to be the kids, but they grew up. And now all of a sudden I'm thinking about me. Now it's my turn. I like to have the coach help me. I think having the coach and concentrating on my favorite sport is helping me be a better me.

Catherine's experiences with her coach go well beyond benefits to swim technique. In sum, we judged our swimmers' stories about their coaches to reflect various themes for what MSs wished to derive from their time spent with coaches. These included swimming specific benefits, such as self-efficacy, improved performance, and interest in swimming, but also non-swimming benefits, such as keeping a healthy lifestyle and developing personally.

We did, however, find divergences in swimmers' beliefs about coaches' influence. As a group of researchers, our comments were divided. The first author was not surprised to

see MSs found swimming and non-swimming benefits from having a coach, as she sought to provide such benefits when coaching her own athletes. The second author was surprised to see this theme as salient, as he had not derived many non-sport benefits from his coaches. The third author cautioned against interpreting these data too openly, as he questioned whether coaches had the capacity to really provide these benefits, or whether athletes sought out additional help beyond swim coaching from which they derived these benefits.

In the following themes, we interpret what swimmers liked in their coaches, and their preferences in how they wanted to be coached.

Characteristics of the Coach

The swimmers most frequently spoke about the attributes that their coaches possess and experiences/behaviors that they felt exemplify the coaches' credibility. All 10 participants discussed this theme for a total of 205 quotes. In making sense of these data, we construed that MSs valued having a coach with experience and professional development, valued certain personal attributes in a coach, and saw the instrumentality of efficient coaching behaviors that held them accountable to their training.

Coaches' accumulated experiences and professional development. MSs felt that coaches' experiences and accumulated professional knowledge helped to establish their credibility. Precisely, they liked when coaches had coaching certifications and/or formal professional development, and liked it when coaches shared evidence of informational resources that could be used to improve their learning. The MSs felt their coaches had accumulated knowledge and experiences in coaching and swimming, which made them proficient. As Beth noted,

Our coach does his own professional development, and when he learns something he brings it back to the team and has us practice it. For example, he was getting coach training for certification. And he came back to us and said, "if you push off the wall, deep in the water, there's less resistance than at the top of the water" which was news to most of us. That was fun—practicing our starts and our turns in a different way that allowed us to play with the water and the physics.

However, we commented throughout three transcripts that certain MSs remarkably did not know or care about their coaches' professional development. Martin said,

As a club, we don't have the budget and resources to provide training for our coaches. The only thing that we require of our coaches, other than showing up on time, is that they have their NLS. (National Lifesaving Society, lifeguard training)

Jordan explained, "If I was getting really serious about competing at an upper level, I would try to figure out her (the coach's) credentials. But I'm not, so I haven't asked her."

The first and third author held opposing biases about these findings. One of us was surprised to see that an adult would not care about coaching credentials, and the other was surprised that most of the MSs felt accreditation was an important coach characteristic.

Seven MSs noted they liked that their coach had knowledge from being a coach or swimmer, because it made them appear competent. Whitney said,

I like the fact that my coach is a swimmer. And he's a good swimmer. He has obviously, at some point, competitively swum. He will set a program and get in the water too. That makes a difference to me—between a coach that I never see swimming and a coach that swims—it gives me a different level of respect.

Jordan also noted,

My coaches should know the strokes. They should know swimming. Our current coach does. We've had coaches that don't know as much about swimming. You know, they have been a lifeguard and that's about what they know. They haven't been Masters swimmers or swimmers at any level. So that's important.

Lorna contributed,

Maybe there should be a certificate for coaching at a Masters level. It shouldn't be big, but maybe something for coaches to learn geared towards adults, which is a bit different than kids. Because they have all coached kids at some time, and they've coached very competitive teams. So coming to a Masters level, where maybe competition isn't the goal, can be difficult. But it doesn't mean that we aren't very competitive too.

This view was held by seven MSs who felt different knowledge was needed to coach MSs than youth, although not all suggested that their coaches should have special accreditation. We needed to interpret what “different knowledge” meant as MSs had trouble verbalizing what was different. For example, simultaneously coaching, training, and competing at a Masters level was deemed an attractive coaching attribute to these participants. This may give coaches a unique insight into the abilities of their athletes. Youth coaches arguably do not coach and personally train at the same level. The first author had the experience of coaching Masters athletes and competing as one, and her athletes told her that they appreciated this unique quality.

Personal attributes. Throughout our comments on transcripts, we inferred that MSs had a preference for coach attributes characterized by professionalism and reliability, being relational to athletes, being friendly and wholly involved, and fostering mutual loyalty and reciprocal caring. Kelly explained,

I want to be with a good coach, somebody who takes it seriously. They're not just showing up and getting to the pool 10 minutes after the start of our hour and posting a make-it-up-on-the-fly kind of practice on the board.

Indeed, we judged that certain MSs wanted a coach who was very involved. Beth noted,

My coach is very involved—a lot of the coaches are like that. A lot of our coaches actually swim with us. One of the reasons he is my favorite coach is that he competes with us at meets.

Furthermore, Darren stated, “My coach makes a point of coming to the Christmas party and end-of-the-year party and different social events like that. He encourages friendship amongst the swimmers. I think it's important.” Darren elaborated on how the coach's loyalty encouraged MSs to care about their training and competition:

Our coach puts a lot of effort into coaching and he's got this incredible loyalty to all swimmers, which I never understood before. It's very important to him that his club does well. He gets just about everybody participating in all the meets. And the team always does. Most of the swimmers don't want to do it, but they do it because he wants them to . . . I could never understand how the coach could get so many adults to give in and compete when they didn't want to. I didn't understand why they just didn't say no. Now that I'm here, I see he has this incredible loyalty to the swimmers. You see he really cares about the club and he puts a lot of effort into it, and so the swimmers are willing to go out of their way and willing to do a lot of things.

We interpreted that MSs preferred coaches who were highly invested in the club, and that coaches' commitment fostered mutual loyalty and reciprocal caring, which influenced MSs to go beyond what they originally planned to do.

Coach behaviors that maximize efficiency and hold athletes accountable. We noted how MSs wanted coaches to behave in ways that fostered accountability to the swimming, for instance, by making efficient use of limited pool time, getting athletes to work hard, and managing lane selection with discretion.

Kelly explained how her coach was efficient:

If we have an hour, we know that we have to work hard to get the practice done in an hour. We're never done 5 minutes early. There's a good use of our time and the practices are always set. For example, if we're just doing kick, then the distance is enough that I need to push, the pace is such that I'm always working hard.

We appraised the idea that the coach had a role in engineering a hard work ethic, which all athletes agreed upon, but in different ways. Beth noted,

If athletes don't show up, the coach can't be yelling at us the way she might if she were coaching a youth competitive team where kids are always sleeping in. The coach is able to recognize that we're all adults.

However, Martin noted,

Adults have a tendency, in between sets, to hang out at the end of the lane and chat. She discourages that quite actively. She says, [claps hands briskly] “get moving” . . . We sometimes get lazy and use fins in the workouts so sometimes she’ll tell us “no; you can’t use fins and you can’t use a board.” She’ll actually take it away from us to the grumbling of some individuals. She does a very good job at that.

Darren summed up this difference in opinion regarding the way Masters coaches behave:

My coach monitors for effort, but not attendance. Swimming is always a side part of people’s real lives, and they’ve got families and grandkids, and medical issues, and all kinds of personal stuff going on. So I’ve never seen a coach step in and be very forceful and I don’t think he should be.

We noted the integrity of workouts often depended on MSs being allocated to correct lanes according to training prescription (e.g., stroke, pace time). Furthermore, we noted how MSs had varying preferences for how coaches manage lanes. Swimmers revealed the task of lane assignment was difficult for coaches, whereby some MSs found it important for coaches to use discretion when assigning lanes, whereas others wanted coaches to tell them bluntly in which lane they should swim. Jordan said,

There were four of us in lane three and we’re all older guys, close to 65 now. And then the coach did a re-alignment and she put us in lane two, a slower lane. That felt a little bad. Maybe it was inevitable but I kind of liked being in lane three. I thought, “well, I’m in the middle of the pack. I’m pretty good for my age.”

Other athletes did not feel that their coaches’ lane shuffling was an issue that they take personally, but that it was a discretionary coaching role that they appreciated. Darren said,

People don’t want to swim with others that are much faster or much slower. So it’s just a natural grouping that takes place anyway. But I’ve got to say that my coach does a good job because he’s pretty blunt and sometimes people are swimming in lanes where they shouldn’t be. This coach will tell the guys to move back down to the proper lane. It’s important to not be afraid to step up and talk to the swimmers. It must be awkward for the coach, but he still has to do it.

Such contrasting perceptions appeared to suggest a quandary in that certain swimmers wanted and expected discretionary coaching actions, whereas others preferred that their coaches refrain from such actions. On the whole, however, we found MSs needed coaches to be very aware of their preferences, holding athletes accountable without being authoritative and maximizing efficiency of workouts without guilt-tripping or hurting feelings.

Instruction

In this theme, we included preferred types of feedback and various strategies MSs talked about when coaches instructed them on technique and form. All 10 MSs discussed this theme for a total of 163 quotes.

Feedback. We found MSs had various preferences and dislikes for how and when coaches provided feedback. They preferred that coaches pay close attention to their individual needs, give positive and constructive feedback, avoid negative feedback, and challenge them. For example, Martin said,

Coaches actually have to look at and engage with each person differently; some people do want that really active sort of coaching—some people don’t. And it’s really understanding what each individual wants and giving them what they need. There are two aspects of coaching. One is providing people with the technical mechanics of swimming and then there’s the other aspect of engaging with them in a way that they want to be engaged. I think that coaches of youth have to have more technical ability because they could potentially be coaching a future Olympic athlete. At a Masters program, the coaches have to have a certain amount of that but they actually have to have more people skills. I think the people skills to be a Masters coach are different and it’s actually probably harder.

Having “people skills” was important to MSs and meant coaches needed to pay close attention to the individual needs of swimmers. We noted how this theme connected well with the theme that MSs want a coach with experience, because, once again, different knowledge was needed to coach Masters athletes than youth. Jordan noted,

I remember once the coach centered me out. She criticized my stroke. She said, “try harder” or something. I probably had a sore arm and she was shouting at me. Not in a mad way but shouting. I didn’t like that. If she wants to talk to me, come and talk to me. Don’t shout at me and say, “Jordan, that’s not good” or “you gotta try harder” because there might be reasons why I’m not pushing myself that day. I’ve had arthritis for 30-some years. There are days I’m not as good as other days.

Many MSs expressed an inclination for coaches to understand their personal distaste for close attention from the coach if public criticism ensued. Alternatively, Catherine noted how her coach provided a more positive and nurturing form of close attention:

I remember something that the coach did that I really appreciated. One day I was really slow getting in the water and I guess he noticed. He came over, “Are you feeling OK?” And I thought, “Wow, that’s good.” And I said, “Well no I’m not.” I didn’t expect that. So he said, “Oh well, go in the slow lane, you don’t have to push yourself. Today you don’t feel good, don’t kill yourself.” He obviously knew I wasn’t faking.

Whitney liked how her coach challenged her to work harder and gave positive feedback. She explained how this resulted in better performance:

I never had great front leg kicks. We would always do kicking holding a flutter board and sometimes I would actually cheat, like, “I’ve only got five meters left, I’m just going to finish it off with a breast stroke kick because my breast stroke is a lot faster.” But the coach said, “don’t compete against other people in your lane. If they are faster than you, just concentrate on how it’s feeling to you. Just keep practicing, it’ll come over time.” I never actually expected that to happen. But I do actually feel stronger and then all of a sudden one day I thought, “everyone’s not actually zooming off without me today, so this training is working.”

These differing ways of providing attention and instruction to MSs were something we discussed as a research group. We had trouble accounting for varying needs of athletes with respect to instructional feedback, which may be a testament to the heterogeneity of competitive participants in Masters swimming, which was also reflected in our sample.

Strategies. We also found MSs held an affinity for various techniques and strategies that coaches used to facilitate learning in the course of instruction. They liked when coaches got in the pool, gave one-on-one attention (especially when coaches would bring assistant coaches to help ensure this could happen), provided intellectual stimulation, and used video. Jordan explained, “The coach is not on the deck very much. She’s mostly in the water at the end of the lane talking to people. So she’s very hands-on.” His intonation indicated he enjoyed being coached in this way. Max noted,

I don’t want to go a whole lesson without at least having some feedback from the coach. The coach will bring on assistant coaches, which helps with that. Now we’ve got another coach who has coaching experience and a lot of people know him. They’re always making an effort to make sure that there’s one extra resource there that we can, you know, touch. It’s important because there are only two of them to cover fifty or sixty people.

Lorna elaborated that she liked intellectual stimulation. Coaches should explain “why” as a strategy to getting the MSs to buy-into the drill:

He’d tell us why we’re doing the drill. Not just what the drill is, but why. That’s really important to all Masters swimmers that I know, including myself. As an adult, I’m not just going to take directions anymore. I want to know why I’m doing it so that it makes sense. And I think we’ve become far more defensive about doing things that don’t make sense. We’re not going to do them if they don’t make sense, so we want to know all the reasons why we should do the drills.

In another vein, we noted MSs wanted coaches to use video and other equipment/resources to facilitate learning: Whitney said,

When the Olympics were taking place, the coach got all these little clips of training excerpts and put them on Youtube and he would Tweet us to say, “have a look at this” or he may say, “we’re gonna really practice our turns next week. Go and look at this website and click on the demonstration video.” It’s a lot broader than what he does on the side of the swimming pool.

Not all coaches enabled athletes this way, despite swimmers’ apparent want for such strategies. Disappointed, Darren noted, “He’s got the underwater camera and all that. But except for the one clinic I go to at Christmas time, that camera never comes out.”

Planning Structural Elements

This theme involved two sub-themes: (a) at the level of the practice and (b) at the level of the program. All 10 participants spoke to this theme for a total of 136 quotes.

At the practice level. We found that the MSs held preferences for ways in which coaches created practices that were challenging and variable, to foster their accountability to practice.

Beth explained,

When you swim by yourself you have to create your own structure and I find that I don’t swim as long or as hard. The coach creates a practice where there’s a warm up, and then there’s alternating hard in terms of endurance or hard in terms of speed and then recovery and then going at it again and then recovery.

Martin concurred,

I think probably the biggest thing about being part of the Masters swim program is it’s structured, it has a coach, it has a workout—you know, it’s very consistent. Those are the parts that I like about it. Swimming without a Masters coach, just going to an open lane swim, is not the same. It lacks that level of interest. It’s hard to sustain . . . Our coach makes interesting practices and makes sure you are putting in the effort.

Whitney further explained,

Yesterday, we started off with shorter distances, which I love. I’m not a long-distance swimmer; I’m a sprinter. But I know in a couple of weeks the coach is going to say, “OK, 500 meters, timed swims tonight.” Then I’m going to have to do it. It’s not something I do on my own because I’m never going to race that event but he’s training me, so I build up to that event anyway.

We determined that through planned practices, coaches helped MSs be more responsible for training in ways they would not have without a coach.

At the program level. Based on the MSs’ stories, we judged there to be themes at play at a broader level—they spoke

about how they wanted their coaches to construct a long-term plan that accommodated them and made them feel they were receiving quality programming. Swimmers appeared convinced that having a coach was in many ways consonant with quality programming, and that this justified their continued time investment in swimming. Justin said,

I know what I do, I really just keep doing what I've always done and I may take a couple of days rest before a particular competition but it's pretty haphazard. And I justify it, because I've got a lot of other things on the go. But in a coach-directed environment, he takes the burden off doing something that I'm not doing well and brings a professional discipline to it. The big thing is having the season planned . . . There can be confusion when a meet is coming up. He's extremely good at organizing summer events and relays and tracking results that takes the pressure off the athlete.

Darren elaborated,

In the lead up to a competition, the coach is getting you ready from the start of the season, building it up to a certain point. There's a gradual ramp up of the intensity, and paying attention to where you and all of the other swimmers are, and your level of progress for the year. And then you're kind of ready to go; in your prime for the meet itself.

Max noted how the coach helped them make smart training decisions:

I'm trying to swim more distance. I'm trying to swim 200's and 400's and I just kind of die out three quarters of the way through. So the coach says, "Well, do it like this: break it up into four 100's and then give yourself 30 seconds between each one. OK. Now give yourself 20 seconds between each one." Slowly I'm building up my ability to do the 400 so it's a neat way of breaking it down that I hadn't thought of myself . . . It helps me because then I can stop at a certain level, do that for a little while until I feel better, and move up again. When I do it myself, I just swim as fast as I can for the 400 meters and then I'll say "damn it! I can't do this!" So he's got a structured way to break it down to help me.

We found MSs wanted coaches to consider and account for flexibility in programming opportunities and to create quality programming that enabled them to improve over time.

Coaches' Interactions Relating to Competition

We built this theme around quotes, experiences, and comments that captured MSs' preferences for coaching related to competition, which included how coaches helped them prepare for competition and behave during and immediately following competitions. All 10 MSs discussed this theme for a total of 90 quotes.

Preparing for competitions. We deduced that swimmers wanted coaches to disseminate specific information about

rules, strategies, and registration for upcoming competitions to give them a competitive edge. Justin explained,

The coach figures out which events are going to be less subscribed. He will say, "Maybe 800 meter breast stroke is your best event, but you know what, there are going to be a lot of people swimming 800 meter breast stroke. You'd be better to do the 200 meter breast stroke, where it's a tough swim but you're more likely to place higher and get more points for the team" . . . Similarly with the relays, he's just brilliant. If he's putting two or three teams into that relay, he knows how to balance things out. I wouldn't know where to begin with the relays.

In terms of teaching competition-specific information and rules, or refining swim technique for competition, Martin explained,

When you're swimming in a Masters group, you don't necessarily have to worry about flip-turns and the legality of whether that's correct or not but if you go to a swim event, you do. I've been disqualified from an event before. The coaches will help me to understand what a legal flip-turn is for a particular event.

Jordan expanded,

Another thing the coach did occasionally was talk about rules in competition. That's useful to know if you don't want to get disqualified in an event. And then she'd have us do dive practice. It's a little bit of preparation.

Overall, MSs wanted coaching and information related to competitive nuances, and they liked that coaches did not assume all MSs understood these nuances.

During and immediately after competitions. MSs discussed wants and needs from coaches such as provision of specific information, support, and feedback relating to performance issues during competitions or relating to post-competition debriefings. What struck us as investigators were the ever-positive attitudes toward having coaches at competition. Beth noted,

Sometimes coaches will give us tips in between events. So, for example, I'll do an event and I'm not doing my stroke properly, I'm getting too tired because I'm doing it too fast. I'll get a tip about, "OK—next time you do that, remember to breathe in between . . . it's actually better to go slower and then you have more endurance to finish" or, that kind of stuff. So we'll get tips on the side of the pool.

Max explained how coaches are supportive:

The coaches are very, very technical ahead of time but afterwards, you know, we're not kids anymore. So it's not like "you screwed up" or "you had a good day, you had a bad day." It's more positive feedback. Keeping me motivated to want to go back for the next competition.

Justin noted,

The coach offers us more knowledge than what we know ourselves about the competition. For example, I wouldn't have thought my body would respond well to a half hour warm-up and then some extra sprints. I thought it would tire me out. To be told that's the right way to do it, and to see it work—I needed the coach to do that. It's the same thing with cool downs, without that being drilled into you, how important it is, I probably wouldn't do it. Yet when you're doing multiple events in the same day, it's so important, that recovery point. So managing a long day with warm-ups, cool downs and a certain amount of food and fluids, is not something you do very often. And having that mapped out for you by the coach has helped out at competition.

The swimmers also mentioned unique experiences of having coaches compete alongside them. As Whitney said,

He also competes, which is pretty cool and there's always feedback from that perspective. So he'll catch you, may take some photographs of you, may even take some video of you. He'll speak to you pretty much as soon as you get out of the pool, unless he has to get back and talk to someone else or unless he's in his own event, which is great.

MSs have the unique situation of having their coaches potentially compete at the same venue, which we thought might be detrimental to the coaches' impact at competition. Despite the uniqueness of this situation, all swimmers spoke positively about this experience, as it was motivational, and helped with their perception of the coach's credibility.

Discussion

We pursued this study on the premise that Masters athletes may be different from oft-studied younger athletic cohorts (Dionigi, 2008; Young et al., 2014), and that their distinctive coaching needs are unknown. Our interpretation of MSs' experiences with their coaches paints a picture of preferences for this age cohort, one that includes themes that can be discussed in relation to Masters sport research, extant coaching literature, and adult learning.

Benefits: What They Get

Swimmers discussed their coaches' influence on development inside and outside swimming. With respect to personal and social development in Masters sport, Baker, Fraser-Thomas, Dionigi, and Horton (2010) offered a framework for exploring core developmental processes, resources, and experiences related to different external assets and internal assets. Our results parallel many of the cohort-specific suggestions they proposed. For example, with respect to Baker et al.'s four external assets (i.e., support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time),

MSs described how coaches offered positive feedback and instruction, and emotional support (i.e., support), increased their performance and self-efficacy (i.e., empowerment), set long-term goals and evaluated their progress (i.e., boundaries and expectations), and offered quality instruction (i.e., constructive use of time). In terms of internal assets (i.e., commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity), some MSs discussed how coaches challenged them and increased their accountability to swimming (i.e., commitment to learning), influenced overall health behaviors (i.e., positive values), fostered loyalty (i.e., social competencies), and improved self-confidence (i.e., positive identity).

Interestingly, MSs expressed how coaches endowed them with greater self-efficacy or confidence. Although quantitative work found coach leadership failed to predict Masters athletes' self-confidence and suggested the nature of adult sport makes them less reliant on coaches as efficacy sources (Wilson, Sullivan, Myers, & Feltz, 2004), our results point to the contrary. Overall, these results underscore the value of having a coach for MSs and suggest Masters coaches can influence both external and internal assets, including confidence. In terms of the non-swimming benefits of having a coach, some swimmers did not mention or even denied any benefits. The variability in how MSs acknowledged and viewed such transferable benefits beyond the pool suggests that more research should examine relationships between positive development and Masters sport to better understand developmental benefits of sport for this cohort, as well as the role of the coach in fostering development.

What They Want and Need

The MSs noted on several occasions that coaches needed a different approach when coaching them than when coaching youth. Morris-Eyton (2008) noted some MS coaches use commonsense pedagogical methods of instruction, without recognizing differences between coaching adults and children. Morris-Eyton suggested coaches do not necessarily abide by adult education principles, such as those proposed by Knowles et al. (2012)—fostering self-directedness; drawing on prior experience as a basis for learning; creating opportunities for critical reflection; and collaborative problem solving. Knowles (1984) originally termed the application of these strategies as pertinent to the model of andragogy. Knowles et al. (2012) noted that andragogy and pedagogy exist on a continuum from student-centered learning to teacher-directed, respectively. The potential viability of andragogic considerations may help explain what MSs in our study were referring to when they said coaches needed a different approach. For example, MSs indicated a preference for coaches to explain, justify, and/or rationalize drills. When coaches do this, they help athletes critically reflect and problem-solve on their learning, thus individualizing learning.

Macroscopically, themes presented in this article converge around notions of congruency between athletes' needs/wants, and how coaches address these needs/wants in their relations/interactions with MSs. Parallels can be found in Chelladurai's (2007) multidimensional model of leadership, which stipulates effective coaching depends on how well coaches balance the demands of a situation and athletes' preferences, and how well coaches create congruence among required, preferred, and actual behaviors. Athletes' satisfaction and/or performance depends on this congruency. In this study, interpretations of MSs' lived experiences suggest that an enriched experience in coached competitive clubs might similarly depend on how coaches navigate congruency.

Evidence of divergence and contradictions. Microscopically, we found many divergences and contradictions among participants. For example, some MSs knew and appreciated what coaching certifications their coaches had, but others believed coaching certification was not important. This seemingly contradicts how important all participants felt it was that their coaches had knowledge and resources to coach them. The swimmers assumed coaches learned information through experiences working with them. Although research indicates much of what coaches learn comes from their experiences with athletes (Mallett et al., 2009), the importance of formal coaching education should not be discounted, especially with regard to receiving and learning information that can then be tested and refined through experiences with a certain cohort of athletes (Deek, Werthner, Paquette, & Culver, 2013). Some MSs appeared to lack an understanding of the value of coaching education courses for coaches to learn about teaching functions and strategies.

Further micro-analysis also revealed contradicting findings relating to how coaches must modify their approach depending on individual athletes. For example, MSs appeared divided on how their coaches directed them to various lanes depending on abilities and effort. MSs insinuated that a coach ought to consider each swimmer's ego, so as to be delicate when communicating the need for swimmers to change lanes (especially moving to slower lanes) without hurting feelings. MSs' want for coaches to have specific "people skills" was also noted in their preferences for how coaches delivered feedback. Based on MSs' experiences, paying close attention to the emotional makeup and intellectual stimulation of Master athletes may be a very significant area of consideration for coaches. These considerations parallel aspects of Jowett's (2007) 3 + 1 Cs model, which suggest successful coach-athlete relationships satisfy three relational constructs: closeness, commitment, and complementarity. In younger sporting cohorts, these constructs have been linked to the quality of coach-athlete relationships, which has influenced athletes' performance (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), self-perceptions (Jowett, 2007), and satisfaction (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004), and may also be important for fostering MSs' perceptions of mutual loyalty and

reciprocal caring with coaches. Furthermore, various coach attribute sub-themes found in this study, such as being relatable, friendly, and wholly involved, appear to embody aspects of relational constructs that adult swimmers hold in high regard.

With regard to competition, another contradiction was interpreted: On one hand, MSs liked that their coaches competed in the same venue as they did, as it was inspirational and gave them a respect for coaches' abilities. Conversely, they wanted coaches' attention and feedback, yet coaches were sometimes unavailable because they were competing. Dionigi (2008) found some older athletes were extremely competitive although they denied it. It is possible that our sample of MSs disregarded the importance of having a coach at competitions to avoid appearing as though they needed a coach to help them perform competitively.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions

Generally, we heard from MSs who wanted coaches who displayed similar characteristics and behaviors to what Côté and Gilbert (2009) have dubbed "effective coaches," in which coaches must consistently apply "integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes' competence, confidence, connection, and character in specific coaching contexts" (p. 316). MSs wanted coaches who were caring, supportive, professional, relatable, and involved, and who helped build self-efficacy, interest, and competence. MSs also placed special emphasis on wanting coaches who paid attention to their individual needs while using instructional strategies and feedback, were efficient, and held them accountable. They liked coaches who prepared them for nuances of competitions, and competed alongside them, even when this involuntarily meant coaches would spend less time with them. We uncovered other incongruous findings, whereby some MSs denied that coaches fostered positive development opportunities outside swimming. Finally, there was incongruency in how MSs understood the value of coaching education courses, believing them to be especially important for coaches of high-performance competitors, therefore not essential for Masters coaches, while preferring coaches who had been informed by teaching strategies that adhered to the principles of adult learning (e.g., Knowles et al., 2012; Merriam et al., 2006).

There were limitations to this investigation. Some MSs had participated in swimming throughout their lives, others returned to swimming after years off, and still others were fairly new to the sport. However, we did not analyze the data according to these profiles. Coaches cannot take for granted that all Masters athletes have similar experiences or backgrounds in the sport. Future research could explore coaching preferences of Masters athletes depending on their profile, such as their pathway into or continuity in Masters sport (e.g., Harada, 1994), their degree of competitiveness or sociability (e.g., Hodge, Allen, & Smellie, 2008), or their

athletic narrative (e.g., Rathwell et al., 2015). Future research should also explore whether coaches' perspectives of their lived experiences with athletes are congruent with MSs' perceptions, and how coaches learn to coach to the preferences, needs, and desired outcomes considered above. Although this work is grounded in the premise that coaching preferences of adults are unique and different, an account of where, how, and the degree to which age cohorts are different would be facilitated by future research that asks these questions with suitable age samples, involving the perspectives of both coaches and athletes. Finally, our results apply to MSs in Canadian clubs. We believe aspects of the lived experiences of MSs relate to adult athletes' experiences in other sport domains and in other Westernized countries (e.g., Hastings, Kurth, Schloder, & Cyr, 1995), but we caution against wide generalization. Future research is required to examine the nature of coaching needs in different sports, and in different countries, to better inform practice in Masters sport.

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Underlying research materials related to the article may be accessed by emailing the first author.

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