

Coaching Styles in Sport: A Comparative Analysis Between Individual and Team Sports

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ABSTRACT. Sports coaching plays a crucial role in developing athletes' performance and psychological well-being, yet the styles adopted by coaches vary significantly between individual and team sports. This paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of coaching styles used in these two categories of sport, highlighting their specific features and their impact on motivation, cohesion, and performance. In individual sports, the direct and personalized relationship between coach and athlete favors democratic and supportive styles that foster autonomy and mental resilience. In contrast, in team sports, success depends on group dynamics and the coach's ability to manage conflicts and promote collaboration, often by balancing authority with emotional support. Studies indicate that rigidity in applying coaching styles can negatively affect athlete performance and satisfaction, underscoring the importance of adapting the coaching style to the context and the athletes' characteristics. Moreover, cultural and social factors also influence the strategies adopted by coaches. The findings of this analysis can guide practitioners in developing flexible and effective methods that meet the specific needs of athletes from different sport disciplines. In doing so, this paper contributes to the theoretical and practical foundations of sports coaching, offering valuable perspectives for optimizing performance in both individual and team sports.

Key words: *coaching styles, individual sport, team sport, sports performance*

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INTRODUCTION

Sports coaching is a complex and multidimensional process that influences athletes' performance both physically and psychologically. Coaching styles defined as coherent sets of behaviors and strategies adopted by coaches in their interactions with athletes play a key role in creating an environment conducive to skill development and the achievement of sporting goals (Smith & Smoll, 2016; Cucui, 2013a; Cucui & Cucui, 2014). While the concept of coaching is universal, its application differs significantly depending on the nature of the sport whether individual or team-based. Understanding these differences is essential for coaches, researchers, and practitioners, as the way the coach-athlete relationship is structured directly influences motivation, satisfaction, and performance (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Cucui, 2016).

In individual sports, the coach works in a direct and intense relationship with the athlete, often exerting a personalized influence on both the training plan and the athlete's psychological development. This relationship is frequently centered on the individual's specific needs, and coaching styles oriented toward autonomy support and constructive feedback have been associated with increased intrinsic motivation and improved mental resilience (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Cucui, 2017). In sports such as athletics, tennis, or swimming, tactical decisions and in-competition adjustments largely depend on the athlete, making democratic and supportive coaching styles essential for success (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Cucui & Cucui, 2016a). Coaches who provide emotional support and encouragement contribute to positive psychological states, reduce anxiety, and enhance self-confidence—factors often translating into superior performance (Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffett, 2002).

By contrast, team sports involve a far more complex dynamic, in which success depends on group collaboration and cohesion. Coaches must manage not only the individual development of players but also their interactions, potential conflicts, and collective strategies (Carron & Eys, 2012; Cucui, 2013b). Coaching styles in team sports often require a delicate balance between authority and emotional support in order to stimulate group motivation, promote effective communication, and strengthen team spirit (Weinberg & Gould, 2014; Cucui & Cucui, 2016b). In disciplines such as football, basketball, or volleyball, the coach's ability to adapt their style according to the players' differing personalities and skill levels is fundamental for creating a positive climate and achieving competitive performance (Horn, 2008; Cucui, 2019). Effective leaders employ both directive and participative styles to address team needs and manage the stress inherent in high-level competition (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Cucui & Cucui, 2018a).

A common factor across both sporting contexts is that a rigid, inflexible style can negatively affect athletes' performance and motivation. Research has shown that coaches who exclusively apply an authoritarian style risk generating additional stress and reducing athletes' satisfaction, whereas supportive and democratic styles foster the development of autonomy and competence—essential elements of intrinsic motivation (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Cucui & Cucui, 2018b). The adaptability of coaching style to athletes' individual and collective characteristics is therefore a key determinant of coaching effectiveness (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Cucui, 2016). For example, a track and field coach may adopt a more directive approach during critical training periods but shift toward a more understanding style when managing the athlete's psychological state before competitions (Smith & Smoll, 2016; Cucui & Cucui, 2025).

Moreover, organizational culture and social context play an important role in determining adopted coaching styles. In some cultures, authoritarian styles are more accepted—and even expected—while in others the emphasis is on athlete autonomy and democratic relationships (Horn, 2008; Cucui, 2020). Consequently, researchers underline the importance of considering the cultural and socio-emotional context when examining the dynamics of sports coaching (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Cucui & Cucui, 2016c).

Given these differences and contextual factors, a comparative analysis of coaching styles between individual and team sports becomes essential to better understand how to optimize coaching interventions according to the specific characteristics of each sport type. Such understanding can contribute to the development of training programs for coaches that incorporate skills in stylistic adaptation, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal relationship management (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Cucui, 2013c).

Therefore, this paper aims to comparatively analyze the coaching styles applied in individual versus team sports, to highlight their advantages and disadvantages, and to assess their impact on athletes' sporting performance and psychological development. This endeavor is relevant to both academic research and sports practice, contributing to the foundation of coaching strategies tailored to the specific context of each sport.

Hypothesis

We hypothesize that there are significant differences between the coaching styles applied in individual and team sports, and that these differences can support and guide the training process in achieving the specific objectives of each sport type.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study sample consisted of 90 active athletes, of which 44 were individual sports (athletics, tennis, swimming) and 46 team sports (football, basketball, volleyball). Participants were selected on a voluntary basis, with inclusion in the study limited to those who provided consent and were willing to complete the online questionnaire.

To evaluate coaching styles, the translated and adapted version of the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS), originally developed by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980), was used. This scale comprises 40 items designed to measure athletes' perceptions of their coach's behavior in relation to leadership styles, including autocratic, democratic, and supportive approaches. The LSS is a widely validated international tool frequently used to investigate coaches' behaviors and their influence on athletes.

Athletes completed the online questionnaire between February and April 2025. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to completion. To ensure anonymity, data were collected and processed confidentially.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 28. The arithmetic mean and standard deviation were calculated for each dimension of coaching styles. To compare differences between athletes from individual and team sports, an independent samples t-test was applied, with a significance threshold of $p = 0.05$. The results were interpreted to identify significant differences between groups in terms of perceived coaching styles.

RESULTS

The study analyzed the opinions of 90 athletes: 44 participants in individual sports and 46 in team sports. The Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS) was used to measure athletes' perceptions of coaching style, structured across five dimensions: Training & Instruction, Democratic Behavior, Autocratic Behavior, Social Support, and Positive Feedback.

Table 1. Comparison of coaching style dimensions between individual and team sports

Dimension	M_individual	SD_individual	M_team	SD_team	p-value
Training & Instruction	4.125	0.368	3.794	0.380	0.0001
Democratic Behavior	3.378	0.481	4.067	0.465	0.0000
Autocratic Behavior	2.552	0.636	2.644	0.642	0.4992
Social Support	3.778	0.422	3.984	0.387	0.0178
Positive Feedback	3.857	0.415	3.897	0.436	0.6540

Legend: M = average, SD = Standard Deviation, p-value – statistical significance threshold

Training & Instruction

The results indicate that athletes in individual sports perceive a significantly higher level of coach involvement in technical and tactical aspects of training ($M = 4.125$) compared to athletes in team sports ($M = 3.794$, $p = 0.0001$). This difference may be explained by the specific nature of individual sports, where performance largely depends on individualized technical preparation and the refinement of personal skills. In this context, coaches need to adopt a style focused on rigorous instruction and close monitoring of athlete progress to optimize individual performance. Therefore, the emphasis on Training & Instruction reflects the necessity of adapting coaching to the specific demands of individual sports, where technical details can make a decisive difference in competition.

Democratic Behavior

Conversely, athletes in team sports reported a significantly higher perception of democratic behavior from coaches ($M = 4.067$ vs. $M = 3.378$, $p < 0.001$). This finding highlights the importance of active athlete participation in decision-making and communication within the team. In collective sports, success depends not only on individual skills but also on group cohesion and effective coordination among team members. Thus, coaches adopt a leadership style that encourages dialogue, involvement, and consensus to promote responsibility and commitment from each member. Democratic behavior facilitates a collaborative environment, essential for sustainable team performance.

Autocratic Behavior

Analysis of autocratic style revealed no significant differences between athletes in individual and team sports ($p = 0.4992$). This suggests that perceptions of an authoritarian style, characterized by unilateral decisions imposed by the coach, are relatively balanced across both groups. It is possible that, in both contexts, coaches employ autocratic elements during key moments of training or competition, such as crises or situations requiring strict discipline. However, the overall low prevalence of this style indicates a general tendency to avoid excessive authority in favor of more participative and supportive approaches.

Social Support

Athletes in team sports reported a significantly higher level of social support from coaches ($M = 3.984$ vs. $M = 3.778$, $p = 0.0178$). This aspect is particularly relevant in team sports, where interpersonal dynamics and emotional

support from the coach contribute significantly to group cohesion and maintaining a positive environment. Social support from coaches includes encouragement, empathy, and the provision of a psychologically safe environment that facilitates open communication and collaboration. In individual sports, although social support remains important, the immediate need for it may be perceived as lower due to the more autonomous nature of sport.

Positive Feedback

No significant differences were identified between individual and team sports regarding the provision of positive feedback ($p = 0.6540$). This indicates that coaches, regardless of sport type, recognize the importance of constructive and motivating feedback in the training and performance process. Positive feedback is essential for enhancing athletes' self-confidence, maintaining motivation, and reinforcing effective behaviors. The consistent application of this style suggests a standardized and valued practice in coaching that does not directly depend on sport-specific characteristics but rather reflects good practices in the coach-athlete relationship.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study support the hypothesis that there are significant differences in coaching styles perceived by athletes participating in individual sports versus those in team sports. The comparative analysis highlighted clear distinctions in the perception of coach behavior, particularly in the dimensions of Training & Instruction, Democratic Behavior, and Social Support, reinforcing the idea that the type of sport influences not only coaching practice but also how it is perceived by athletes.

Athletes in individual sports reported significantly higher technical-tactical involvement from their coaches (Training & Instruction), which can be attributed to the specific nature of these disciplines, where the coach-athlete relationship is more direct and success depends primarily on individual preparation. These results align with the multidimensional leadership model proposed by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980), which suggests that coaches in individual sports more frequently adopt a task- and instruction-focused style tailored to the needs of each athlete.

In team sports, participants perceived significantly more pronounced democratic behavior from coaches, reflecting the need for collective decision-making and athlete involvement in strategic and tactical processes. Such approaches

are fundamental in sports where interaction, cohesion, and adaptability to group dynamics are critical for performance (Wang et al., 2009). A democratic leadership style fosters a positive climate in which athletes feel valued and involved, enhancing motivation and collective responsibility (Fransen et al., 2015).

The differences identified in the Social Support dimension indicate a higher level of perceived support among team sport athletes, which can be explained by the importance of emotional support in maintaining morale and group cohesion. Recent literature emphasizes that social support from coaches is an important predictor of athlete well-being and engagement, particularly in team sports where interdependence among team members is critical (Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2021).

Regarding Autocratic Behavior and Positive Feedback, no significant differences were observed between the two sport categories. This result may indicate a convergence of these leadership styles, likely influenced by contemporary trends toward reducing rigid authority and integrating positive feedback as a standard practice in modern sports coaching (Carpentier & Mageau, 2016). The absence of significant differences in these dimensions may reflect coaches' adaptation to athletes' expectations, who value dialogue, support, and clarity of goals regardless of the sport.

The findings have practical relevance, as they support the idea that coaches should adapt their leadership style according to the specific context of the sport practiced. In individual sports, emphasis should be placed on individualized instruction and autonomy, while in team sports, a balance between participative leadership and socio-emotional support is necessary to maintain cohesion and collective motivation. These insights provide a reference framework for coaches' professional development and for optimizing the coach-athlete relationship.

The study also has certain limitations. Data were collected through self-report, which may introduce a degree of subjectivity, and the sample was relatively small and unbalanced in terms of gender and competitive level. Future studies could adopt a mixed-methods approach, including direct observations, qualitative interviews, and comparisons between perceived and actual coaching styles. Additionally, analyzing the congruence between athletes preferred and perceived coaching styles would be valuable, as high alignment is associated with improved performance and satisfaction in sport (Chelladurai, 1990; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

This study confirms that coaching styles vary according to the type of sport, providing evidence in support of a differentiated approach in coach training and intervention. These findings contribute to the development of effective sports leadership adapted to the demands and realities of both individual and team sports.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study highlighted significant differences in coaching styles perceived by athletes participating in individual versus team sports, confirming the initial hypothesis that the type of sport influences the perception of coach behavior. Specifically, athletes in individual sports reported greater coach involvement in technical-tactical instruction, whereas athletes in team sports more frequently perceived a democratic style and higher levels of social support.

These findings are relevant for understanding how coaches can adapt their leadership styles according to the sporting context, emphasizing the importance of behavioral flexibility and a needs-centered approach for athletes. Furthermore, the data support the specialized literature promoting a coaching relationship based on trust, participation, and emotional support as key factors in enhancing athlete performance and satisfaction.

Overall, this research contributes to the theoretical and practical foundation of sports leadership, providing a solid basis for the development of coach education programs focused on adaptability, effective communication, and a deep understanding of relational dynamics depending on the specific sport practiced.

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