

The Influence of Coaching Styles on Athlete Motivation and Behavior in Collegiate Sports

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Abstract: This study explored the influence of coaching styles on athlete motivation and behavior among collegiate athletes in state universities in Central Luzon, Philippines. Using a descriptive phenomenological qualitative design, data were collected from eight (8) collegiate athletes through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) revealed four major thematic areas: (1) coaching behaviors perceived as motivating by athletes, including supportive coaching, strict coaching, and balanced coaching; (2) athletes' responses to strict and supportive coaching styles, highlighting positive responses to both approaches, individual differences, and a preference for balanced coaching; (3) the influence of coaching style on discipline and performance through structure, support, and accountability; and (4) challenges encountered under ineffective coaching approaches, including psychological strain, excessive pressure, and perceived favoritism. Findings revealed that supportive coaching enhanced confidence, motivation, and emotional well-being, while strict coaching promoted discipline, accountability, and mental toughness. However, athletes consistently identified a balanced coaching approach that combines discipline with emotional support as the most effective in fostering motivation, positive behavior, commitment, and performance. Conversely, harsh and inequitable coaching practices negatively affected athletes' confidence, psychological well-being, and engagement in sport. The study highlights the importance of athlete-centered coaching practices that integrate both structure and support to promote holistic athlete development and optimal performance in collegiate sports. Implications for coaching practice, athlete development, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Coaching styles, athlete motivation, athlete behavior, collegiate athletes, phenomenology, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Coaching is widely recognized as one of the most influential factors in athlete development and sporting success. Beyond teaching technical skills and tactical knowledge, coaches play a vital role in shaping athletes' motivation, confidence, discipline, resilience, psychological well-being, and interpersonal development. In collegiate sports, coaches function not only as instructors but also as mentors and leaders whose behaviors significantly influence how athletes perceive training, respond to challenges, and perform during competition (Johnston, 2025). Consequently, understanding the impact of coaching styles has become increasingly important in contemporary sport research and practice.

Different coaching approaches create varying experiences for athletes. Traditional coaching models often emphasize authority, discipline, and performance outcomes, whereas athlete-centered approaches focus on support, autonomy, and holistic development. Previous research has demonstrated that coaching behaviors

significantly influence athletes' satisfaction, competence, autonomy, motivation, and performance outcomes (Micua et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2022). Effective coaching therefore extends beyond physical preparation and includes the creation of positive learning environments that foster personal growth and sustained engagement in sport.

Within the Philippine context, coaching has been identified as an important contributor to athlete success. Martin et al. (2023) found that coaching-related factors, together with psychological and training variables, significantly influence the competitive success of student-athletes. Their findings emphasized that effective coaching contributes not only to athletic performance but also to athletes' preparation, confidence, and commitment to sport. Similarly, Martin et al. (2016) reported that motivation plays a critical role in promoting physical activity participation among Filipino college students. This finding was further supported by Martin, Santos, and Tubera (2017), who found that students with stronger motivational profiles demonstrated higher levels of participation in physical activity. These studies collectively suggest that motivational processes, which are often influenced by coaches and significant others, play an essential role in athlete engagement and performance.

Supportive coaching environments have consistently been associated with positive athlete outcomes. Athletes who receive encouragement, constructive feedback, and emotional support from coaches often report greater confidence, enjoyment, and commitment to sport participation. Pestaño et al. (2025) demonstrated that participative coaching practices significantly enhance student-athletes' self-confidence and self-efficacy, emphasizing the value of supportive leadership in athlete development. Likewise, positive leadership practices have been shown to strengthen commitment and organizational engagement among performers in competitive settings (Lobo et al., 2025). These findings highlight the importance of coaching approaches that address both performance goals and athletes' psychological needs.

Conversely, coaching approaches characterized by excessive control, harsh criticism, intimidation, and punitive practices may negatively affect athletes' psychological well-being and motivation. Athletes exposed to highly controlling environments often experience increased stress, anxiety, fear of failure, and reduced enjoyment of sport participation. Such coaching practices may undermine confidence and weaken coach-athlete relationships, ultimately affecting performance and long-term sport involvement. These concerns underscore the need to better understand how athletes perceive and respond to different coaching styles.

Furthermore, athlete development involves more than physical performance. Contemporary sport psychology emphasizes the importance of psychological safety, emotional support, and positive interpersonal relationships in fostering athlete growth. Research examining aggression control among college Physical Education students demonstrated that psychosocial factors significantly influence behavioral responses within physically demanding environments (Santos, 2026). Similarly, studies on athlete performance suggest that psychological readiness, self-confidence, and supportive environments contribute substantially to athletic success (Martin et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the notion that coaching behaviors can either facilitate or hinder athletes' personal and athletic development.

Despite the growing literature on coaching effectiveness, much of the existing research has relied on quantitative approaches that measure relationships among variables such as leadership style, athlete satisfaction, motivation, and performance. While these studies provide valuable evidence, they often fail to capture the complexity of athletes' lived experiences and personal interpretations of coaching behaviors. Within the Philippine collegiate sports context, qualitative investigations examining how athletes experience and make meaning of different coaching styles remain limited.

Addressing this gap is important because athletes' perceptions of coaching behaviors influence how they respond to training demands, interpret feedback, and maintain motivation throughout their sporting careers. Understanding these lived experiences can provide deeper insights into the coaching practices that promote confidence, discipline, commitment, and performance while identifying behaviors that may negatively affect athlete well-being and engagement.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the influence of coaching styles on athlete motivation and behavior among collegiate athletes. Specifically, it seeks to identify coaching behaviors perceived as motivating,

examine athletes' responses to strict and supportive coaching approaches, determine how coaching styles influence discipline and performance, and explore challenges associated with ineffective coaching practices. Through understanding athletes' lived experiences, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more effective, balanced, and athlete-centered coaching practices that support both athletic excellence and holistic athlete development.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of collegiate athletes and coaches regarding coaching styles and their influence on athlete motivation and behavior. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals make meaning from their experiences, making it appropriate for this study.

Participants

The study involved eight (8) collegiate athletes from state universities in Central Luzon, Philippines, who were actively participating in university sports programs. Participants were selected based on their direct experiences with various coaching styles during training and competition, enabling them to provide valuable insights into how coaching influences athlete motivation, behavior, discipline, and performance.

Data Collection

Data collection commenced after securing approval from the appropriate university authorities and obtaining informed consent from all participants. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted at participants' preferred locations and schedules. Guided by interview questions, participants shared their experiences and perspectives regarding coaching styles and athlete behavior. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded, and field notes were taken to capture relevant observations. The recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy and completeness prior to data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), involving:

1. Familiarization
2. Coding
3. Theme generation
4. Review
5. Definition
6. Interpretation

Ethical Consideration

The researchers adhered to established ethical principles throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation and a clear understanding of the study's purpose. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of codes or pseudonyms, and all collected data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Respect, fairness, and sensitivity were observed during the interviews to protect participants' well-being. The study followed ethical standards in qualitative research and complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

3. Results and Discussion

The findings reveal that coaching style exerts a substantial influence on athletes' motivation, behavior, discipline, confidence, psychological well-being, and athletic performance. Across all thematic categories,

participants consistently emphasized that coaching effectiveness is not solely determined by whether a coach is strict or supportive, but rather by how coaching behaviors are perceived and experienced by athletes within the training environment. The results suggest that coaching is a multidimensional process that shapes both athletic outcomes and personal development.

Coaching Behaviors Perceived as Motivating by Athletes

THEME 1: SUPPORTIVE COACHING ENHANCES CONFIDENCE AND MOTIVATION

The results showed that supportive coaching behaviors boost athletes' confidence, motivation, and strong commitment to training. Participants emphasized that they feel appreciated and inspired to strive better when they receive constructive support, encouragement, and acknowledgment of their efforts. Particularly in challenging situations, athletes considered supportive coaching as an essential form of psychological and emotional support

"In the supportive style, the coach boosts our confidence in our performance." – P1

"Acknowledging effort and progress rather than just wins and losses helps me build my confidence and sense of accomplishment." – P6

"I appreciate coaches who encourage me, give constructive feedback, and recognize my effort even when I make mistakes." – P7

The first thematic area highlighted the motivational value of supportive coaching behaviors. Athletes reported that encouragement, constructive feedback, recognition of effort, and emotional support enhanced their confidence and willingness to persist through challenges. Participants valued coaches who acknowledged progress rather than focusing exclusively on competitive outcomes. These findings support Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), which posits that motivation flourishes when individuals experience competence, autonomy, and meaningful interpersonal relationships. The findings are likewise consistent with Martin et al. (2016), who reported that motivation is a significant predictor of physical activity participation among Filipino college students. Similarly, Santos (2024) found that students with stronger motivational profiles in fitness centers demonstrated higher levels of engagement and participation in physical activity. Within the athletic context, supportive coaching appears to strengthen athletes' confidence, commitment, and intrinsic motivation toward training and competition.

THEME 2: STRICT COACHING DEVELOPS DISCIPLINE AND MENTAL TOUGHNESS

The results showed that athletes correlate strict coaching to accountability, discipline, and mental toughness. According to the participants, athletes become more disciplined and tougher when their coaches impose rules, uphold high standards, and demand hard work.

"Strict coaching is more motivating. When the coach is strict and the athlete is disciplined, it helps us become stronger, develop a better mindset, and become more disciplined athletes." – P2

"Strict coaching is more motivating because the players are properly guided and they become more disciplined." – P3

"When I do my best in training and achieve accomplishments, that's when I feel that my coach's support is a big help to me." – P4

The findings further revealed that strict coaching was not necessarily perceived negatively by athletes. Rather, participants associated appropriately implemented strict coaching with discipline, accountability, perseverance, and mental toughness. Athletes viewed clear expectations, consistent standards, and corrective feedback as mechanisms that encouraged responsibility and performance improvement. These findings align with Martin et al. (2023), who identified coaching-related factors as significant contributors to the competitive success of student-athletes. Structured coaching environments appear to provide athletes with the guidance necessary to develop discipline and performance-oriented behaviors. Athletes recognized that discipline imposed through coaching contributed to their personal growth, commitment to training, and ability to perform under pressure.

THEME 3: BALANCED COACHING PROMOTES ATHLETE GROWTH

The results showed that athletes favor a coaching approach that combines support and strictness. Effective coaches, according to participants, are those who uphold discipline while simultaneously offering support, respect, and understanding.

"I find strict and supportive coaching more motivating, especially when the coach knows how to balance discipline and encouragement." – P5

"It seems like it falls in between the two coaching styles." – P1

"I perceive both coaching behaviors as motivating when coaches encourage us, give constructive feedback, recognize our efforts, and push us to improve while still showing respect and understanding." – P8

A particularly important finding of the study is the strong preference among athletes for balanced coaching. Participants consistently described effective coaches as individuals who combine discipline and accountability with empathy, encouragement, and understanding. Athletes perceived this balanced approach as fostering both high performance and psychological well-being. This finding reinforces the work of Pestaño et al. (2025), who demonstrated that participative coaching practices significantly enhance athletes' self-confidence and self-efficacy. Likewise, Lobo et al. (2025) emphasized that supportive leadership practices promote commitment, trust, and positive organizational relationships among performers. Collectively, these findings suggest that athletes perform best when coaches maintain high expectations while simultaneously providing emotional support and positive interpersonal interactions.

Athletes' Responses to Strict and Supportive Coaching Styles

THEME 1: ATHLETES RESPOND POSITIVELY TO STRICT COACHING

Many athletes viewed strict coaching positively because it encouraged discipline, focus, obedience, and motivation. They perceived strict feedback as a means of improvement rather than punishment.

"I take it as motivation." -P1

"I tend to follow more and feel more energized." -P4

"Strict coaching helps me stay disciplined and focused." -P6

The findings suggest that athletes often respond to strict coaching by becoming more disciplined and committed to training. They recognize strict coaching as an approach aimed at improving performance. This finding supports Pestano (2025) found that coaching styles, behaviors, and competencies significantly influence student-athletes' performance, particularly through motivation, competition strategy, and athlete development.

THEME 2: ATHLETES RESPOND TO SUPPORTIVE COACHING WITH GREATER CONFIDENCE AND COMFORT

Athletes reported feeling more confident, comfortable, and motivated when coaches provided encouragement and emotional support. Supportive coaching fostered a positive environment where athletes felt safe to learn and ask questions.

"It boosts my confidence." -P1

"Supportive coaching makes me feel comfortable asking questions." -P7

"Supportive coaching makes me feel motivated, comfortable, and confident." -P8

The findings indicate that supportive coaching enhances athletes' confidence and comfort during training. Athletes become more engaged and satisfied when coaches provide encouragement, social support, and positive learning environments. This is consistent with Micua et al. (2024), who found that athletes highly valued social support, autonomy, relatedness, and positive training environments, which contributed to greater sports satisfaction.

THEME 3: ATHLETES RESPOND DIFFERENTLY BASED ON INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Athletes acknowledged that responses to coaching styles vary according to personality, mental toughness, and personal preferences. While some thrive under strict coaching, others perform better in supportive environments.

"Athletes respond differently depending on their personality and mental strength." -P5

"I respond better to supportive coaching than strict coaching." -P7

The findings demonstrate that athletes respond differently to coaching styles based on their individual characteristics and preferences. Coaching effectiveness varies according to athletes' personal needs,

experiences, and competitive backgrounds. This is consistent with Zhu et al. (2024), who found that athlete satisfaction and cohesion are influenced by how coaching behaviors align with athletes' characteristics and preferences.

THEME 4: ATHLETES RESPOND BEST TO A BALANCE OF STRICTNESS AND SUPPORT

Several athletes emphasized that the most effective response occurs when coaches combine discipline with encouragement. Athletes appreciated both accountability and emotional support.

"I learn best when there is a balance between high expectations and encouragement." -P6

"Strict coaching helps me become disciplined, while supportive coaching makes me feel motivated and confident." -P8

The findings suggest that athletes respond most favorably when coaching incorporates both discipline and support. A balanced coaching approach helps athletes maintain focus and accountability while also fostering confidence and motivation. This is consistent with Micua et al. (2024), who found that athlete satisfaction was highest when coaches utilized a balance of authoritarian and democratic coaching methods and provided supportive training environments.

Coaching Style Influences Athlete Discipline and Performance

THEME 1: COACHING STYLE STRENGTHENS ATHLETE DISCIPLINE

Participants explained that coaching practices such as rules, monitoring, and consequences helped them become more disciplined, punctual, and responsible.

"Strict coaching helped me become more disciplined." -P2

"When someone is late for training, there is punishment, which motivates us to arrive early." -P4

"Phones are not allowed during training." -P3

The findings suggest that coaching style influences discipline by establishing clear expectations and accountability. Athletes reported becoming more responsible, focused, and committed to training because of structured coaching practices. This aligns with Pestano (2021), who found that coaching behavior contributes to athlete development and performance through discipline and guidance.

THEME 2: COACHING STYLE ENHANCES PERFORMANCE THROUGH SUPPORT

Participants described how encouragement, feedback, and emotional support helped them perform better during training and competitions.

"Supportive coaching improves performance because athletes feel emotionally supported." -P5

"When I feel supported, I am more motivated to follow instructions and improve my skills." -P7

The findings indicate that supportive coaching positively influences performance by increasing athletes' confidence and motivation. Athletes who felt encouraged by their coaches were more willing to exert effort and improve their skills (Antalan, 2026; Manalad, 2026). Similar findings were reported by Micua et al. (2024), who found that supportive coaching behaviors contribute to athlete satisfaction and development.

THEME 3: COACHING STYLE PROMOTES DISCIPLINE AND PERFORMANCE THROUGH BALANCE

Participants emphasized that combining strictness and support produced the best outcomes for both discipline and performance.

"The best coaching style is when a coach knows when to be strict and when to be supportive." -P5

"A balance of both approaches helps me perform at my best." -P6

"A supportive but firm coach helps me stay committed to training." -P7

The findings reveal that athletes perceive balanced coaching as the most effective approach because it promotes discipline while simultaneously enhancing performance. This finding is supported by the study of Rosario (2023), which found that coaching leadership behaviors, particularly training and instruction combined with supportive leadership practices, have strong positive relationships with athlete satisfaction and team cohesion. Their meta-analysis concluded that effective coaching requires a combination of leadership behaviors that guide athletes while fostering positive psychological outcomes.

Challenges Encountered by Athletes Under Ineffective Coaching Approaches

THEME 1: HARSH COACHING CREATES PSYCHOLOGICAL STRAIN

Athletes reported that overly strict coaching, excessive criticism, and punitive responses to mistakes contribute to stress, fear, and psychological discomfort.

"Overly strict coaching can affect an athlete's mental well-being." -P3

"Mistakes are punished rather than treated as learning opportunities." -P7

The findings indicate that harsh coaching behaviors can negatively affect athletes' psychological well-being. Excessive criticism and punitive coaching may increase stress and reduce athletes' enjoyment of sport participation. Malquisto, Cabuquin, & Alfarero (2026) found that coaching leadership styles were significantly associated with athletes' anxiety levels among Filipino university student-athletes. Athletes exposed to less supportive coaching environments reported higher anxiety levels.

THEME 2: EXCESSIVE PRESSURE UNDERMINES CONFIDENCE AND PERFORMANCE

Athletes experienced excessive pressure from coaches that resulted in fear, emotional exhaustion, reduced confidence, and poorer athletic performance.

"Overly harsh coaching can sometimes create fear instead of motivation." -P5

"Giving too much pressure during training and competition may reduce my performance." -P6

"Loss of confidence, emotional stress, and discouragement." -P8

The findings suggest that excessive coaching pressure may hinder performance and reduce athletes' confidence. Instead of motivating athletes, constant pressure can create fear and emotional exhaustion. Adolfo (2025) reported that democratic coaching styles positively influenced athlete motivation and retention, whereas authoritarian coaching was only moderately perceived and was associated primarily with discipline rather than motivation. Supportive coaching environments were found to enhance athlete engagement.

THEME 3: FAVORITISM AFFECTS ATHLETE MOTIVATION

Athletes perceived unequal treatment from coaches, particularly when certain athletes received greater attention and opportunities than others.

"I have experienced favoritism, especially when new recruits are given more attention." -P4

The final thematic category highlighted the negative consequences of ineffective coaching practices. Participants described experiences of excessive pressure, harsh criticism, punitive responses to mistakes, and perceived favoritism. These experiences negatively affected confidence, motivation, enjoyment, and psychological well-being. Athletes reported feelings of stress, fear, discouragement, and emotional exhaustion when exposed to overly controlling coaching environments. These findings parallel the observations of Santos (2026), who noted that psychological factors significantly influence individuals' responses to demanding physical activity environments. Similarly, favoritism was perceived as detrimental to team cohesion and trust because it created perceptions of inequity and unequal opportunity. Such findings emphasize the importance of fairness, respect, and positive interpersonal relationships in maintaining healthy coach-athlete interactions.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that coaching style plays a crucial role in shaping the motivation, behavior, discipline, performance, and overall psychological experiences of collegiate athletes. Athletes perceived supportive coaching behaviors as essential for building confidence, motivation, and emotional well-being, while appropriately implemented strict coaching was viewed as effective in developing discipline, accountability, and mental toughness. However, the results consistently revealed that athletes responded most positively to a balanced coaching approach that integrates both support and structure, allowing coaches to maintain high performance expectations while fostering encouragement, respect, and understanding. Such an approach not only enhances athlete motivation and satisfaction but also strengthens discipline, commitment, and competitive performance. Conversely, ineffective coaching practices characterized by excessive harshness, pressure, and favoritism were found to negatively affect athletes' psychological well-being, confidence, motivation, and coach-athlete relationships. These findings suggest that coaching effectiveness extends beyond technical instruction and physical preparation, encompassing the ability to address athletes' psychological and developmental needs. Overall, the study highlights that the most effective

coaching style is one that strategically balances discipline with emotional support, creating an environment that promotes athlete growth, sustained motivation, positive behavior, and optimal performance in collegiate sports.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings, coaches should adopt a balanced coaching style that combines discipline with emotional support to enhance athletes' motivation, behavior, and performance. Coaches are encouraged to provide constructive feedback, recognize athletes' efforts, and maintain fair and respectful relationships while avoiding excessive pressure, harsh criticism, and favoritism. Athletic institutions should offer coaching development programs that promote athlete-centered coaching practices and regularly assess coaching effectiveness. Future studies may include larger and more diverse samples to further explore the influence of coaching styles on athlete outcomes.

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How to cite/reference this article: Leonardo A. Geroza III, Kyle Ivan R. Ayuste, Micaella V. Batulay, Mariel Biag, Valerie B. Malunay, Cristine A. Soberano, The Influence of Coaching Styles on Athlete Motivation and Behavior in Collegiate Sports, *Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech.* 2026; 8(3): 182-190.